Navigating spatial inequalities : the micro-politics of migrant dwelling practices during COVID-19 in Antwerp

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and its multiple lockdowns disrupted city life, and restrictions on physical distancing and urban activities highlighted the importance of our living environment and its links to our well-being. As part of the COVINFORM research project, this case study uses a micro-political lens to explore the specific spatial challenges which migrants face in two more socially deprived neighbourhoods in Antwerp. This study aims to understand the specific spatial challenges which migrants face in Antwerpen-Noord and Borgerhout during the pandemic and examine how migrants navigate and assert agency within the confines of their living situation during the COVID-19 pandemic. We combine participant observation with 25 semi-structured interviews with migrants living in two neighbourhoods in Antwerp (Flanders, Belgium), namely Borgerhout and Antwerpen-Noord. Findings show that the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced urban spatial disparities, where people's strategies of adaptation were suddenly disrupted. Lower-income migrants were particularly affected, living in crowded housing without access to private open space. Access to public and green spaces, as well as facilities and public transport links, became more important during the pandemic, especially for those in poorer housing conditions. Within this context of spatial inequalities, migrants deployed their agency through claiming access to the city, shifting dwelling practices, and leveraging neighbourhood and community networks.

Keywords:
Migration, Public Space, Poverty, Exclusion, Housing, Covid-19

Introduction

Urban spatial inequalities have been exposed and exacerbated due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although COVID-19 restrictions affected everyone, a city square or park is an extension of a household for those living in spatial poverty and can normally be a relief from cramped living

conditions (Beeckmans et al., 2022). For example, L'Aoustet and Griffet (2004) examined the significance of young people hanging out in Borely park in Marseille, which provides space for young people to connect with each other and the community, fostering unity and coexistence. This supports the "green magnet" theory of parks as catalysts for social interaction (Gobster, 1998). When restrictions allowed, accessing urban public or green spaces and local facilities for leisure was important for well-being during COVID-19, but, compared to affluent neighbourhoods, such areas are often smaller, less well-maintained, and scarcer in lower-income neighbourhoods (EEA Briefing, 2022).

It has been well-documented that socially disadvantaged populations, including lower-income groups, ethnic minorities, migrants and the elderly, often have less access to public spaces (Gao et al., 2023). In their study, Malone and Hasluck (2018) emphasise the significance of the built environment as a symbolic representation of control where as a result, many young people opt to remain 'invisible' in public, effectively withdrawing from such spaces. This behaviour can be attributed, at least in part, to exclusionary practices that overlooked the needs of young individuals during the development of neighbourhoods. Additionally, commercialization has transformed spaces that were initially intended for young people, limiting their mobility due to economic constraints and insufficient amenities. Furthermore, stereotypes and fears perpetuate portrayals of youth as both victims and perpetrators of violence, exacerbating the withdrawal of young people from public spaces. Moreover, feminist geographers argue that the urban environment has been shaped in a manner that systematically marginalised women, either by excluding them from public spaces altogether or by limiting their participation to predefined and restricted roles (Ruddick, 1996). During lockdowns, access to public space suddenly became limited, further rendering visible spatial inequities and uneven spatial access (March and Lehrer, 2021).

Lower-income groups, in addition to having fewer urban spaces and facilities in their locality (Rokem and Vaughan, 2019), were also restricted to a smaller geographic area during the pandemic. These groups are often more dependent on public transport and less likely to own a car (Lucas et al., 2016). During the pandemic, therefore, restrictions on mobility affected people living in these neighbourhoods to a higher extent. A qualitative study (De Backer et al., 2022) highlighted that migrants faced both temporal and spatial immobility during the pandemic, influenced by migrants' legal status and housing situations. The experience of being locked inside an asylum centre was noted and compared to that of being "locked out" of public facilities, particularly asylum seekers and undocumented migrants whose support services closed.

These inequalities took place in the context of an 'affordability crisis' impacting increasing numbers of the population (Wetzstein, 2017). Gentrification is a phenomenon largely driven by the logic of the real estate market, which includes the maximisation of profit by attracting wealthy residents and businesses to neighbourhoods. This leads to a rent gap, negatively affecting lower-income groups and changing the form of urban areas (Smith, 1996). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the value assigned to green areas has increased among the population, with a knock-on effect on prices of property close to green areas, leading to what some scholars have described as 'green' gentrification (Larcher et al., 2021; Broitman, 2023).

In the context of these urban spatial inequalities, De Backer, Dijkema and Hörschelmann (2019) state that simply claiming access to the city can be a form of political action, rather than using the city as a platform for political claims. Claiming access to public space can be a political act, where marginalised individuals can navigate and contest norms, visibility and power in urban environments. Building on this, the concept of micro-politics refers to how power is exercised and contested in everyday social interactions and practices (Smith, 2017). The main idea is that "many

invisible and visible minor acts are part of a power negotiation that has political value" (De Backer et al., 2019). Himada and Manning (2009) emphasise the idea that micro-politics is the force within political events that has the potential to disrupt and redefine them, similar to how our ability to perceive tiny details influences our overall perception.

Focusing on the micropolitical can shine a light on marginalised perspectives, including those based on race, class, gender, and sexuality (Jellis and Gerlach, 2017) and also provide useful insights on post-Covid trends including intensified gentrification. This can be linked with the work of Hughe on resistance (2019), who argues that power and resistance are intertwined and cannot exist independently of each other. The author suggests that resistance is not always a clear opposition to power but can take various forms. Even in difficult situations, there is always the possibility of resistance and opposition. Similarly, the concept of "everyday resistance" or "infra politics" was introduced by Scott (1985) to describe a type of resistance that is not as obvious or dramatic as organised protests or rebellions. An example includes the "micro-politics of dwelling practices" which has been discussed by some scholars in response to the structural inequalities persisting in urban settings (Preece et al., 2023). The "micro-politics of dwelling practices" specifically refers to the agency people can exercise in the restrictive housing market. This includes whether people can negotiate trade-offs in their dwelling preferences, such as making trade-offs between their home's size versus location (Lau and Wei, 2018; Easthope et al., 2020). Given the impact of COVID-19, it is important to explore how changes in dwelling preferences (Larcher et al., 2021; Broitman, 2023) occurred within the context of structural inequalities.

The following research questions will be explored through the paper.

1) What are the specific spatial challenges which migrants face in Antwerp-Noord and Borgerhout?

2) How do individuals navigate and assert agency within the confines of their housing circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Study setting

The population focus of this case study comprises members of migrant communities residing in Borgerhout and Antwerpen-Noord, specifically first-generation migrants who have been in Belgium for over 5 years. Borgerhout and Antwerpen-Noord exhibit significant diversity. In 2023 (Stad in Cijfers), 36.2% of Borgerhout's residents have two Belgian parents, compared to 25.5% in Antwerpen-Noord. Meanwhile, 24.9% of Borgerhout's residents are first-generation migrants, and 38.9% in Antwerpen-Noord (Stad in Cijfers, 2023).

Antwerpen-Noord and Borgerhout, in particular, witnessed increased surveillance and policing during COVID-19, resulting in a surge in the issuance of 'GAS boetes' (local administrative sanctions or fines that police can issue for violating local rules, such as making noise, skateboarding in specific areas, littering in public areas, etc.). These fines already disproportionately affected ethnic minorities before the pandemic, leading undocumented immigrants and other groups to avoid public spaces in Belgium, as outlined by Vander Beken et al. (2014). Furthermore, accessibility to green spaces is not uniform for all residents. For instance, Borgerhout has the lowest percentage (50.6%) of inhabitants living within a 5-minute walk of a park in Antwerp (Burbidge et al, 2022).

Over the past three decades or so, historically marginalized urban areas like Antwerpen-Zuid and Oud Berchem have undergone gentrification cycles, leading to an increase in property values and the cost of living, as noted by Wauters (2015). Consequently, lower-income residents, primarily migrants, were displaced to more affordable neighborhoods, such as Antwerpen-Noord and Borgerhout, resulting in a growing concentration of people with lower incomes in these areas. In 2020, the median taxable income in Antwerpen-Noord was €16,156, and in Borgerhout, it was €18,158, compared to €19,649 in the City of Antwerp (Stad in Cijfers, 2023). Recent years have also witnessed gentrification processes in these neighborhoods (Wauters, 2015; Loopmans et al., 2016). Antwerp has experienced a long-term downward trend in the average habitable surface of new homes and apartments, with house sizes decreasing from 134.6 m2 in 2005 to 110.6 m2 in 2015, and apartment sizes declining from 75.3 m2 to 59.7 m2 (Ward, 2022). Consequently, lower-income residents are increasingly dependent on a shrinking segment of the housing market, which includes smaller homes.

Methods

This study is part of a larger European Horizon 2020 project, COVINFORM, researching the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable populations in 11 different countries. The qualitative study involved interviews with a total of 25 individuals. Participant recruitment was carried out in collaboration with organizations or individuals working with migrants in Borgerhout and Antwerpen-Noord, and via snowball sampling. Within the heterogeneous group comprising 'migrants in Borgerhout and Antwerpen-Noord,' we aimed to encompass diversity regarding the length of stay in Belgium (provided it exceeded five years), gender, age, and country of origin. The interviewees represented

a diverse group of individuals, encompassing three categories of "outsiders of citizenship" - refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented migrants (De Backer et al., 2022; Nyamnjoh, 2006). The study group also included permanent residents/citizens who were born outside the country. Recruitment primarily occurred through local CSOs or NGOs actively assisting the target population within the selected neighbourhoods. Consequently, the majority of those interviewed were low-income and more vulnerable migrants. However, some interviewees also held 'white-collar jobs' with higher incomes. Additionally, one international student was interviewed.

Additional recruitment strategies involved collaborating with community health workers who served as 'gatekeepers.' Community health workers had extensive networks and were well trusted within the target groups. Working through organizations or establishing connections with the target population helped create an environment where respondents felt more at ease sharing openly. Interviews were conducted either in the spaces of Community Service Organizations (CSOs) or in cafes within the respondent's neighborhood, which facilitated their willingness to engage in open discussions. Within these neighborhoods, as part of the broader data collection for this project, interviews were also conducted with health practitioners, local policymakers, and healthcare workers in the area. This additional information provided context for the analysis, complemented by a literature review and field visits.

For the thematic analysis, the qualitative and mixed-methods software NVivo was utilized (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Inductive coding was employed to identify overarching themes relevant to the project. Subcodes were subsequently created to facilitate a more in-depth analysis, forming the basis for the paper. The choice of a case study approach allowed for the inclusion of contextual features and structural conditions in which individuals lived, making it particularly pertinent to address questions regarding housing and public space.

Prior to their participation in the study, all participants provided explicit written consent, indicating their informed willingness to take part. Researchers also provided a comprehensive oral explanation of the study's objectives and methodologies, complemented by a detailed information sheet. Participation in this research was entirely voluntary, with participants retaining the freedom to withdraw from the study at any point, without any obligations or consequences.

Participants

Table 1 presents the participant number, gender, country of birth, and age of the 25 individuals interviewed. In terms of years living in Belgium, there is a range from 5 to 39 years, with an average of 11 years. 14 of the residents interviewed had children.

[Insert Table 1]

Results

The interviews conducted provided rich accounts of the impact the COVID-19 crisis has had on migrants living in Borgerhout and Antwerpen-Noord. The findings are represented by first providing a sketch of the context and situation, examining how and why spatial inequalities and gentrification played a greater role during the COVID-19 pandemic, as typical adaptive strategies were suddenly withdrawn. Next, the paper examines the micro-politics of everyday practices that emerged during the pandemic, with a focus on individuals navigating spatial inequalities within their immediate environments. It will also explore how people adapted their dwelling practices, emphasising the

differential experiences and choices influenced by income and social factors. Finally, the last section considers other types of micro-politics, where people used their collective agency in the face of spatial inequalities.

Spatial inequalities during the COVID-19 pandemic

Findings highlight the vast impact of people's housing situation on their experience during the pandemic and its associated lockdowns. For those living in poorly maintained or overcrowded rental or social housing, its impact on their well-being was exacerbated when restrictive measures led to the closure of public spaces. Adaptive strategies to deal with living conditions were suddenly disrupted, and the home had to accommodate more functions, as shown by the following respondent:

> **(P9)** *"It is not good for us to live here. Because my husband is sick, he has dementia. I also feel ill, I feel depressed when I hear all this noise. We are not little kids, almost seniors. You must live in a place where you can live peacefully. Where you can rest. There is no isolation. You hear everything, really everything. This old social housing is not good. We asked to move. But we just must wait."*

Migrants without legal documentation or those from larger low-income families encounter significant challenges in securing affordable and suitable housing. Reportedly, landlords are often less inclined to offer decent quality housing to lower-income or larger migrant families. The housing costs in Antwerp have increased, leaving respondents living in overcrowded and unsuitable accommodations without the means to afford a better alternative. This situation disproportionately

impacts marginalized groups, particularly those who already experience discrimination within the housing market.

> **(P12)** "*Without gas and electricity, it is 700 euros per month. With bills, it is 1000. This is very expensive. And it is also small. I sleep on the couch, in the living room. Because there is not enough room for us. I live with my daughter her husband and their three children. Sometimes one grandchild sleeps in the parent's room, then I can sleep in the bedroom. This is a problem. We are always looking for a new place to live."*

It becomes clear from the interviews that income was a key divider in the spatial impacts of COVID-19. For instance, respondents with access to a garden and larger living space appeared to experience fewer psychological challenges during the pandemic.

> **(P21)** "*Basically, because we have a garden, even if I decided I needed space, I could still have it - inside, outside. I can't say I was doing walks in the neighbourhood. And it was not comfortable to sit in the park for a while. There were these restrictions, no, you could not sit and stay in the park to have a picnic with people for a while, you could only walk. So, it was good to have the garden, otherwise, I would have gone crazy."*

During the pandemic, people who had a garden were thus less dependent on taking walks in the neighbourhood for their well-being. This meant lower-income groups faced a 'double disadvantage' when restrictions were stricter.

> **(P3)** "*We were always at home. No sports, no restaurant, no school for the kids or sports for the kids. Normally we can go to the park after school for basketball, cycling, and soccer. But then everything stopped. You just had to sit at home."*

Owning a car is often more limited to having a higher income, therefore lower-income residents were more likely to be stuck in their locality (Lucas et al., 2016). One participant (P11) who has a car provided by his work, describes the pandemic as having positive consequences in the sense that the "*streets were empty, places were easy to reach, driving without traffic*". However, another participant (P7) discusses *"not speaking to anyone, as he does not take the tram anymore" and "is too scared to go outside*". The unequal distribution of public transportation between localities, as the following respondent describes, created additional challenges.

> **(P9)** *"There is just one bus that comes every 20 minutes to Luchtbal. It is a problem here. If the bus doesn't come, we just keep waiting. If we want to go to the market here in St Jansplein, we don't have a bus that goes there, so you have to walk. I am sick, I have problems with my knee and my back. For old people, that doesn't go well. We don't have anything. There used to be a bus next door which stopped close to the market. Almost three or four years ago. But now we don't have any. We must walk to the market."*

This locality also varies greatly regarding the facilities offered, as discussed by this participant:

> **(P14)***"I think it was nicer before. There were many shops. There was a butcher, keymakers, everything. There was a wash salon. You could buy TVs, electronics, lamps, everything you could buy at 'Den Dam' [neighbourhood]. There was everything here before. But not anymore. There is nothing anymore. Everything has gone. 'I don't know why. All the people who were here, left. Or they died."*

The economic depression influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic led to the closure of shops and a change in high streets. Online shopping and digitalisation also expanded during the lockdown and for some businesses this made keeping in-person stores more difficult. This threatens to change

neighbourhoods (particularly those already struggling, as the one mentioned above), with empty shop fronts.

The findings suggest that individuals residing in the low-income neighbourhoods of Antwerpen-Noord and Borgerhout were confronted with challenges associated with their spatial circumstances. These include limited living space, decreasing public transportation options and economic consequences stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. However, amidst these difficulties, some positive aspects related to the pandemic were identified during interviews, such as a reduction in car traffic within these neighbourhoods, which typically suffer from high levels of congestion.

Micro-politics: access to the city

In the subsequent section, we will explore how people are addressing spatial disparities in their immediate surroundings. Our focus will be on the dynamics of everyday behaviours that have arisen amidst the pandemic, with a specific emphasis on urban accessibility.

Findings demonstrate that the pandemic significantly influenced the dwelling preferences of respondents, where people realised the importance of both indoor and outdoor private spaces, or being located close to urban green space. The respondent below highlights that dwelling preferences are changing not just as a result of COVID-19, but also considering climate change with the increasingly hot weather.

> **(P23)** "*I have a garden, so the children could play with water in the garden. If you live in a flat, that's completely different, I guess. I have the Rivierenhof [large park] behind me, so yes, I was comfortable. I did think of "Oh dear, the children who live in a flat with five*

children". I did think that we were actually lucky, but I also did not forget the other families in our hearts because that is very bad, especially with that hot weather."

As well as parks, initiatives such as shared gardens or allotments were described as having a positive impact on people's living situations during the pandemic. One interviewee (P2) describes "*living above a parsonage, with a shared garden. I could walk there. Sometimes I could cycle in the garden. Even people who don't live there could come."* When restrictions allowed, living close to green space was seen as an advantage, and provided a source of recreation.

(P22) *"Behind our house was the park and that was good. I knew the park before Corona, but it was during the pandemic when I started going there regularly."*

During the pandemic, people started to frequent green spaces more regularly, highlighting the impact of the pandemic on their relationship with such spaces. Moreover, access to public spaces and local amenities became even more crucial for those living in unsuitable or overcrowded housing during the pandemic. This emphasises the importance of public spaces as a means of expression and release for individuals living in constrained environments.

(P9): "*There are so many naughty children and teenagers running around. Of course, if you keep someone locked up when you finally let them free, they will go wild. We live in social housing where there are just small rooms. Three or four children will be sleeping in the same room. They have no space where they can play. Nothing. So, when they go outside, they let everything go. They explode, and all their emotions come out."*

Some women interviewees discussed feeling excluded from the public realm and withdrawing as a result of harassment. This was heightened during the lockdown and as a consequence of the pandemic and has made accessing certain areas, such as parks, more difficult.

> **(P17)** *"And of course, the parks, you have the Park Spoor Noord. But then you have to go through a less nice neighbourhood to reach it. And as a woman, I don't always find that so easy. Because I am constantly harassed. I don't know if that is impacted by Corona. I think it was there before. But when people couldn't go to the cafes, they were all standing on the street. And that has its consequences. And then after COVID, I think it has become worse because men have been locked up for 2 years or so, and they forget how to behave. If you come at this hour (20:00) on the street, there is barely any woman still outside. You just see men who are likely to harass you, and that is it."*

The experiences shared by women interviewees concerning harassment and exclusion from public spaces demonstrate how gendered power dynamics play out within the micro-politics of everyday practices. The fear of harassment and the need to navigate unsafe neighbourhoods limit women's access to green spaces, thereby reinforcing existing gender inequalities in urban environments.

It could be argued that the pandemic has had a significant impact in increasing the utilisation of green spaces, and bringing attention to the importance of access to public spaces and amenities. This has partly been through magnifying existing inequalities and safety concerns, and the exclusion of groups from these public spaces.

Micro-politics: dwelling practices

This section will illustrate how individuals navigate their dwelling practices in response to the changing circumstances brought about by COVID-19 and highlight the differential experiences and choices based on intersectional factors. Informed by a micropolitical perspective, we highlight how power is relayed in everyday practices of navigating the housing market.

One participant (P18), describes now having "*breathing room*" after moving during the lockdown from a shared studio with her boyfriend to a more spacious apartment with a living room, a separate bedroom, and a terrace. After spending a year living in the studio, she decided that they needed to "*get out of here*", as "*it was not good, it was not healthy*". Similarly, an interviewee who teleworked and had the financial means was influenced by the pandemic to hire extra office space and later move house. He was able to demonstrate agency and make his home more liveable in response to the pandemic and housing inequalities.

> **(P11)** "*I used to live in the heart of the city. The second place we moved to was during COVID. There was more space, close to a large park, Rivierenhof. I wanted more space. It is very important to have space and your garden. Our choice was made in no time thanks to COVID-19. During the lockdown, the first home was too small, or relatively small. That is why we had to rent office space. It costs 150 a month, and you get 24-hour access."*

This depicts the impact which COVID-19 had on his dwelling practices, where the participant was able to act '*in no time*'. However, for those on a lower income on the rental market, or living in social housing, findings show the barriers to navigating the housing market or adapting their housing situation. Those with more disposable income were influenced by the pandemic to move to more spacious housing, yet those on a lower income are forced to settle for what is available. It points to the wider structural and spatial inequalities, limiting some people's agency whilst widening others.

> **(P3)** *"I have to stay here. It's a good location. Five minutes from the hospital. Ten minutes from the school. Eight minutes to CAW [Centre General Welfare]. The small apartment is a problem. But other things are easy. Large apartment or good location? You have to choose.*

Lots of space, but not a good location. My wife can take the tram to go to work. Very short distances. Sometimes you have to accept. Everyone has problems."

It can be said that the trade-offs are shaped by spatial inequalities whilst simultaneously reflecting the small, everyday political acts people employ in the face of spatial inequalities. In summary, these quotes and the accompanying analysis shed light on the micro-political dimensions of housing decisions during the pandemic. They highlight the influence of COVID-19, the disparities between those with higher and lower incomes, the trade-offs shaped by spatial inequalities, and the agency individuals employ in navigating these challenges.

The impact of COVID-19 on individuals' dwelling preferences has also intersected with broader structural forces like gentrification, rising housing costs, and the trend toward smaller properties. These forces influence the availability of housing options and exacerbate inequalities, leading to certain groups having more housing choices while others are pushed away from certain neighbourhoods. For example, lower-income residents are being pushed out of the city centre towards the outskirt areas of Merksem and Deurne Noord, neighbourhoods which were sometimes described negatively in the interviews.

(P16) "*Yes, I'm looking. I look. Sometimes there, here or Deurne, or Merksem [other Antwerp districts]. But other women say 'No, Merksem is not so good'*."

The housing challenges presented by the pandemic also shed light on urban development policies and their implications. For instance, the prioritisation of expensive real estate developments over affordable housing or amenities can exacerbate existing inequalities, further limiting the agency of vulnerable populations. One resident referred to the plans for the Slachthuis housing complex (in Den-Dam, an area in Antwerpen-Noord) where residents fear that developments will lead to the

existing population being 'priced out' of the area. There are concerns that pre-existing social housing may disappear, and existing problems in the local area will remain unsolved. The phrase "that's Antwerp" suggests resignation to a top-down development agenda that prioritizes real estate interests but by vocalising these concerns, she is engaging in a form of micro-political resistance and advocates for a more inclusive and community-oriented approach

> **(P15)** "*I do notice that expensive projects are going on there. There are going to be expensive apartments. Some people are less helped by this, meanwhile, there isn't enough housing for everyone. But yes, that's Antwerp. With its 'long live progress' and 'long live the real estate companies with their expensive projects', even here. Meanwhile, there are no stores here or a bank where you can withdraw money or whatever. There will be a very expensive apartment complex and stores, but there is no provision for financial support.*"

This quote illustrates the tensions and dichotomies arising from individuals' housing choices and their impact on different social groups, with certain groups having more choices while others are pushed away from certain neighbourhoods.

> **(P17)** "*Whether that is also a good sign, that that is gentrifying, is of course also something else, because then you also push other people away with all the consequences. So yes, it is such a dichotomy here…. I do notice that a lot of my friends are buying apartments in the neighbourhood because it is one of the few neighbourhoods that remained affordable after COVID-19. Because yes, everyone wants to buy a house now. Prices are skyrocketing. Interest rates are rising. Everybody is kind of panicking about buying. Young Belgian people are coming to live there, in addition to the multicultural people who were already there. So, I*

don't know if that's tolerable or not. But of course, we'll find out how it's going to change for sure."

While some might find more affordable options in certain neighbourhoods, this can lead to concerns about gentrification and the displacement of lower-income residents, highlighting the complex and intertwined nature of micro-political practices and their wider implications. These observations highlight the interplay between micro-political actions and spatial inequalities, as residents adapt and negotiate their everyday practices within the constraints imposed by their specific urban context.

Micropolitics: everyday resistance

Interviewees discussed how community organisations help to facilitate cohesion in the face of tensions and segregation, which can act as a buffer against housing insecurities and poverty. The COVID-19 pandemic was challenging for vulnerable groups who may be more reliant on their locality for socialising and support, particularly considering digital disparities. It was clear from the interviews that community spaces and organisations provided a vital network, particularly for those without residence permits, those living alone or struggling more financially.

(P10) *"I had a difficult time, and I was really depressed. I just always wanted to stay alone. Then one day a friend said "you should come to SAAMO [Organisation against Social Exclusion]. Here people come to cook and eat together and stuff, you're going to like that". Then I went there with her and I kept going there. I heard people talking about their problems and I thought "All these women have more problems than you, and they are strong". So I started feeling stronger, because of SAAMO. Now I also know a lot of people in the*

neighbourhood through SAAMO. Before I didn't know so many people, but now because of SAAMO, if I go outdoors then everybody says "Hello, hello, hello"."

Both the quotes above and below illustrate that community-based organisations also create chances for people to connect and can play a crucial role in facilitating social support, especially in the presence of uneven spatial distribution of resources and opportunities.

(P19) *COVID-19 times are difficult for some people alone, for old people, for disabled people. So I went with Elegast, to shop for people, to help, yes. Teamwork together for the old people."*

Engagement with different types of public space and networks with the wider neighbourhood seemed to provide a balance to poorer living conditions and be used as a source of resilience. Regular communication with neighbours about everyday things strengthens the feeling of home and thus the bond with the neighbourhood. It helps people feel less alienated from changes and less likely to cut themselves off or leave, indirectly resisting the effects of gentrification. Although it may not seem overtly political, the act of neighbours coming together to share meals and support each other during a time of heightened fear and social withdrawal signifies a form of community resilience.

(P5) "*Everyone was so scared. People came outside less. I have a neighbour who is Nigerian. Every week he came to eat together, for a meal with me. I'm like his daughter. He doesn't cook, so I cook for him sometimes. And he also helps me with my driving licence, to learn to drive a car. Someone downstairs is from Morocco, upstairs is Nigerian, and Somalia in the middle. I am very social. I don't want to stay inside and not talk to people. There is also a*

Moroccan who has a small child, she doesn't go out so often and doesn't talk so much. But one time she had a problem, and then I said if you need anything, just let me know."

This quote shows that although many organisations exist that support people facing difficult living conditions, people still need to rely on their immediate neighbours for support. The dense social networks, for instance, that are easily accessible through small housing, are also used by participants to compensate for other means of social contact. In the absence of sufficient support, neighbours can rally around to assist one another. By offering his help to neighbours for free, he presents an alternative urban approach based on solidarity. The quote below illustrates this, when answering the question, if there were another pandemic, how could the residents of this neighbourhood be better supported?

(P14) *"Helping each other. If people help each other. It is the only solution. Helping older people, would be good, no? Or helping other people. New people. Helping repair stuff for other people. I also help with fixing the electricity of neighbours. I do that for free".*

As P4 below states, relying on local social networks is a way to deal with difficult dwelling conditions.

(P4) *"I live on my own in my room, and then in the other room, there is another person. A good friend. I pay him to stay in the room, but I have a kitchen, a shower, everything. I am happy because he is a good person. I am okay. I keep the house clean, I throw out the garbage. I pay 350 each month. It is good now until my documents are in order."*

Informal housing practices are taking place where friends are sharing their living spaces to help cope with the high cost of housing, or for more marginalised groups such as those without documentation. These informal networks of support or the creation of alternative support systems can (temporarily) help overcome barriers such as segregation and gentrification. Relying on friends

until his 'documents are in order' points to the broader issues of the housing market within Belgium, and how it discriminates against migrants. This demonstrates the wider significance of his living situation, and how it permeates social relations.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper first sheds light on the profound impact of people's living situations during the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, as it seeks to answer the first research question about the specific spatial challenges which migrants face in Antwerpen-Noord and Borgerhout. As people were required to stay close to home during the pandemic, their strategies of adaptation were disrupted and inequalities in domestic space were exposed. This supports the literature that the pandemic reinforced the impact of urban spatial inequalities (Beeckmans et al., 2022; Preece et al., 2023). This was a problem particularly faced by lower-income migrants, who were more likely to live in crowded housing without access to private open space. The interviews showed that access to public and green space, as well as suitable public transport, was more important for people during the pandemic, particularly those living in worse housing conditions. However, access to such spaces remains unequal, particularly for first-generation migrants of a lower income living in more deprived neighbourhoods where there is less green and public space per resident and more limited public transportation. Whilst residents of Borgerhout 'extra-muros' or outside the ring road had close access to a big park, this was more limited for residents in Antwerpen-Noord or Borgerhout 'intra-muros'. Furthermore, the lack of affordable alternatives and the rising cost of living intensified housing insecurities, underscoring the double disadvantage faced by lower-income groups when restrictions limited their access to outdoor spaces. The unequal distribution of public transportation

further compounded the challenges faced by certain residents, including those older and less mobile, with limited bus services hindering mobility and access to essential services. Additionally, the economic depression resulting from the pandemic led to the closure of shops and the transformation of high streets, potentially altering the fabric of neighbourhoods. Despite these issues, some positive consequences were identified, such as reduced car traffic within the neighbourhoods.

A shift took place in people's dwelling preferences in response to COVID-19, with a greater realisation of the importance of indoor and outdoor private spaces, as well as the proximity to urban green spaces including parks and shared gardens. It could therefore be worthwhile to investigate the redesign of buildings to offer some outdoor space while maintaining high density, for example with balconies or shared gardens. During the pandemic, people started to utilise green spaces more regularly, signifying the pandemic's influence on their relationship with these areas and that simply having access to green spaces does not guarantee their automatic utilisation (Bell et al, 2014). Climate change also played a role in shaping dwelling preferences, as people considered the impact of increasingly hot weather on their living conditions. This raises concerns about the adequacy of current housing/building styles in urban contexts. Another related concern is the potential rise in housing costs due to the increased value placed on green spaces. As the literature on green gentrification in Ghent suggests (Goossens et al., 2020), whilst policies for sustainability are crucial, a sufficient supply of housing types and price ranges should accompany green urban planning to avoid "urban green grabbing" and the displacement of lower-income groups (García-Lamarca et al., 2022). Finally, experiences shared by women interviewees underscore the gendered power dynamics within everyday practices, where fear of harassment and unsafe neighbourhoods limit women's access to green spaces, reinforcing existing gender inequalities in urban environments.

When addressing the second question regarding residents' strategies and decisions to overcome spatial challenges and enhance their living conditions, the study sheds light on how individuals adapt their living practices in the face of evolving circumstances prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The differential experiences and choices based on income, migration status, and social factors illustrate the existing spatial inequalities and housing injustices within urban environments. The pandemic has influenced individuals to reassess their living conditions, with some participants able to demonstrate agency and make their homes more liveable by moving to more spacious housing or renting additional office space. In response to spatial inequalities, some individuals make trade-offs that embody the subtle yet political actions employed in their daily lives. However, the impact of the pandemic on dwelling preferences has intersected with broader structural forces such as gentrification, rising housing costs, and the trend toward smaller properties (Ward, 2022). These forces further exacerbate existing inequalities, leading to certain groups having more housing choices while others are pushed away from Antwerpen-Noord and Borgerhout, which remain slightly more affordable places for middle-class groups to buy homes than other parts of the city centre. For example, undocumented migrants or migrants on a lower income are less able to use their agency to navigate the housing market, due to discrimination or a lack of economic resources.

The interviews have coincided with some of the literature (Wauters, 2015; Loopmans, 2008) showing a pattern in Antwerp of poverty shifting between neighbourhoods as a consequence of rising rents and gentrification. According to some scholars, waves of gentrification following the COVID-19 pandemic may be more closely connected to the process of financialization than ever as housing investments became more popular and some benefited from the pandemic while others struggled to keep their homes (Aalbers, 2020). In response, controls and regulations could be introduced and strengthened to protect tenants, with the establishment of social and affordable

housing targets, as publicly subsidised housing is described as a 'barrier to gentrification' (Ley & Dobson 2008). In Belgium of the 30% lower income earners, only 7% are in social housing, with the remainder paying a high rental cost for subpar dwellings on the market (Goris, 2019; Musterd, 2005). To avoid high levels of socio-economic segregation or stigma (Haandrikman et al, 2023., Mustard, 2005., Imeraj et al, 2018., 2021), Vienna serves as an exemplary model for well-distributed and extensive social housing, with approximately 25% of residential dwellings owned by the municipality (Premrov and Schnetzer, 2023).

Looking beyond the micro-politics of navigating the tight housing market in Belgium (Verstraete and Verhaeghe, 2020; Ghekiere and Verhaeghe, 2022), residents reveal how they are using their agency through solidarity and collective power in the face of spatial inequalities to contest gentrification and housing problems. Resources people are drawing upon to manage insecurities about housing include their networks within the wider neighbourhood or the utilisation of community organisations which can act as a buffer against spatial inequalities and poverty. This sense of belonging can reduce the likelihood of social isolation or displacement. Furthermore, the interviews revealed that social networks within close-knit communities can serve as compensatory mechanisms for individuals who may lack other forms of social contact. For example, social networks with neighbours or people living close by are particularly valuable for a first-generation migrant who has it needed when building up a new network. Relying on neighbours is seen as a strategy to cope with challenging dwelling conditions. These findings also highlight the use of informal housing practices as a response to spatial inequalities. Friends sharing living spaces to alleviate the high cost of housing or to support marginalised groups, such as those without documentation, highlight how everyday or 'micro-political' actions of solidarity are shaped by and

also reflect wider spatial inequalities. Investing in spaces and organisations which are providing support is thus crucial.

As humanity will be increasingly urban in the 21st century, cities will need to become more resilient to ongoing and future crises like pandemics and climate change. COVID-19 has shown that we need to prioritise the needs and well-being of vulnerable communities in urban design and planning. As such, this study explored the micro-politics of migrants residing in Antwerpen-Noord and Borgerhout, to understand how they are navigating spatial inequalities. The findings from this study can serve as a resource when considering efforts to protect these neighbourhoods from either rapid gentrification or disinvestment, instead benefiting from fair access to housing, green infrastructure and public services.

Conclusion

This paper offers an exploration of the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of residents in Antwerpen-Noord and Borgerhout. It delves into the specific spatial challenges encountered by migrants in these neighbourhoods during the pandemic. Particularly, lower-income migrants found themselves trapped in overcrowded housing without the luxury of private outdoor spaces. Gendered power dynamics also played a significant role, with women navigating fear and unsafe environments that limited their access to green spaces, thereby perpetuating urban gender inequalities. Within this micro-political landscape, residents employed a variety of strategies to address their spatial challenges. These strategies were heavily influenced by income, migration status, and social factors, illustrating the stark spatial inequalities within these neighbourhoods. The intersecting forces of gentrification, rising housing costs, and the trend toward smaller properties

further complicated the housing landscape. Moreover, the research underscores the agency of residents who, in the face of spatial inequalities, turn to solidarity and collective power. Community networks and organizations act as vital sources of support, buffering individuals against social isolation and displacement.

Micropolitics refers to the hidden or subtle political nature of everyday actions and interactions. It involves actions that may not be overtly political but still have political implications. Our findings suggest while some participants demonstrated a conscious understanding of the political dimensions of their actions and choices, for others, micropolitical actions were instinctual responses to challenging living conditions. They employed these strategies as survival mechanisms without necessarily conceptualizing them as political acts. This underscores the idea that micropolitics can be deeply embedded in routine activities. In-depth ethnographic fieldwork could offer valuable insights into the nuanced ways in which individuals perceive and engage with politics and micropolitics within their specific contexts.

Some limitations need to be listed. It is important to acknowledge power dynamics in the researcher-participant relationship, influenced by factors like education, language proficiency, and ethnic backgrounds, potentially affecting study outcomes. Additional limitations include relating to recruiting through organisations as the most vulnerable populations may not have taken the steps to reach out to organisations for help. Further recruitment challenges include scheduling issues, a predominantly older sample (a relatively larger group of people aged over 50 years), and language barriers. Whilst some respondents gave very detailed responses, some were less willing to share their experiences of the pandemic, perhaps as it was so recent or due to COVID-19 fatigue. Future solutions could involve focusing on a single migrant group with interviewers fluent in their language and using focus groups for sharing experiences.

Whilst research has delved into the impact of the pandemic and spatial inequalities on vulnerable residents (Beeckmans et al., 2022; Gao et al., 2023), limited attention has been paid to the individual choices made by residents to deal with their unfavourable housing and living situations. Consequently, this research holds value in guiding targeted interventions and policies that cater to the needs of vulnerable communities and foster equitable urban environments. By exploring the micropolitical strategies taken by residents living in two of Antwerp's more socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods, as a consequence of COVID-19, we hope to provide a more nuanced understanding of the complexities at play in these communities. Further research could focus on other forms of micro-politics of dwelling practices in the Antwerp context, in response to spatial and housing inequalities, for example, informal housing practices (Ghekiere & Verhaeghe, 2022), co-living arrangements (Tummers, 2016) or tactical urbanism (Lydon and Garcia, 2015), whereby a comparative analysis could identify their strengths and limitations.

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Table 1: Participant characteristics

Participant number	Gender	Country of birth	Age
1	Woman	Philippines	20
2	Woman	Uzbekistan	59
3	Man	Afghanistan	45
4	Man	El Salvador	54
5	Woman	Somalia	32
6	Man	India	33
7	Man	Yemen	40
8	Man	Morocco	41
9	Woman	Morocco	54
10	Woman	Morocco	46
11	Man	Syria	31
12	Woman	Morocco	65
13	Woman	Morocco	26
14	Man	Morocco	49
15	Woman	Indonesia	65
16	Woman	DR Congo	50
17	Woman	Poland	30
18	Woman	Russia	25
19	Man	Sri Lanka	42
20	Man	Turkey	27
21	Woman	Israel	42
22	Woman	Afghanistan	50
23	Woman	Morocco	42
24	Woman	Afghanistan	52
25	Woman	Morocco	38