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Migration and Spatial Justice: Urban Integration of Refugees in Border Cities

Migración y justicia espacial: integración urbana de refugiados en ciudades de frontera

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the challenges and opportunities of urban integration faced by refugees in border cities, emphasizing spatial justice as a critical framework. Border cities often serve as initial points of settlement yet suffer from limited infrastructure, social services, and inclusive policies, resulting in spatial marginalization of refugee populations. Through comparative case studies from Latin America (e.g., Cúcuta, Colombia) and Europe (e.g., Lesvos, Greece), this research employs mixed methods including spatial analysis, policy review, and interviews with refugees, local authorities, and NGOs. The novelty of the study lies in its transregional perspective that connects border city dynamics with the broader debate on urban migration and spatial justice. This article contributes to urban studies and migration scholarship by highlighting how equitable spatial inclusion can foster social cohesion and human dignity in often overlooked urban frontiers.

Keywords *Migration, Spatial justice, Refugee integration, Border cities, Urban inclusion*

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza los desafíos y oportunidades para la integración urbana de refugiados en ciudades de frontera, enfatizando la justicia espacial como marco fundamental. Las ciudades fronterizas suelen ser puntos iniciales de asentamiento pero enfrentan limitaciones en infraestructura, servicios sociales y políticas inclusivas, lo que resulta en la marginación espacial de las poblaciones refugiadas. A través de estudios comparativos en América Latina (por ejemplo, Cúcuta, Colombia) y Europa (por ejemplo, Lesbos, Grecia), la investigación utiliza métodos mixtos, incluyendo análisis espacial, revisión de políticas y entrevistas con refugiados, autoridades locales y ONG. La novedad del estudio radica en su perspectiva transregional que conecta la dinámica de las ciudades fronterizas con el debate más amplio sobre migración urbana y justicia espacial. Este artículo contribuye a los estudios urbanos y migratorios al resaltar cómo la inclusión espacial equitativa puede fomentar la cohesión social y la dignidad humana en fronteras urbanas frecuentemente invisibilizadas.

Palabras clave *Migración, Justicia especial, Integración de refugiados, Ciudades de frontera, Inclusión urbana*

A. Introduction

In the contemporary era of forced displacement, border cities have emerged as the primary "frontline" of refugee settlement. Unlike the historical model of the rural, enclosed camp, current migration trends show a decisive shift toward urban environments, where refugees seek the anonymity, economic opportunities, and social networks that cities ostensibly provide. Border cities, as the first points of entry, function as critical transit hubs and permanent sites of refuge, yet they are often ill-equipped to handle the sudden demographic pressures on their infrastructure. These municipalities face a complex nexus of challenges, ranging from the provision of dignified housing and access to essential public services to the facilitation of formal employment and transit mobility. The "urbanization of displacement" transforms these cities into sites of intense socio-spatial negotiation, where the immediate needs of refugees often clash with municipal capacities and the pre-existing vulnerabilities of the local population.

To analyze the integration of refugees, this study moves beyond mere legal recognition to employ the framework of Spatial Justice. Derived from the works of Edward Soja and Henri Lefebvre, spatial justice posits that justice is not an abstract concept but is physically manifested in the urban form; it concerns the equitable distribution of

and access to urban resources, services, and opportunities (Soja, 2010). In the context of migration, spatial justice addresses how the built environment—through the placement of social housing, the connectivity of public transport, and the permeability of public spaces—either facilitates or hinders the refugee's right to the city. This framework serves as a vital intersectional lens, linking the technicalities of urban planning with the moral imperatives of human rights and the social goals of inclusion. It asserts that for integration to be successful, refugees must not only be legally present but must also possess the "spatial agency" to inhabit and navigate the city as full urban citizens.

Despite the theoretical ideal of inclusion, refugees in border cities are frequently subjected to processes of spatial segregation or systematic informalization. Many find themselves pushed to the urban periphery or confined to substandard, precarious housing markets that lack basic infrastructure. This "spatial marginalization" is often reinforced by urban planning regimes that treat refugees as temporary "guests" rather than permanent inhabitants, leading to a vacuum of long-term integration policies. Furthermore, the informalization of refugee life—where access to work and services occurs outside formal legal structures—creates a state of "urban precarity" that limits upward mobility and social cohesion. There is a profound lack of comparative, cross-regional analysis that examines how different border city typologies respond to these challenges, leaving a gap in our understanding of the universal versus context-specific barriers to spatial justice.

The specific "geopolitics of the border" further complicates the urban integration process, as these cities often operate under a state of exception where national security concerns override municipal social planning. In many instances, the border city becomes a "liminal space"—a site of permanent transit where refugees are caught between the legal requirements of the state and the functional needs of urban survival. This creates a fragmented urban fabric characterized by "border-work," where the physical border is not just a line at the edge of the city but is internalized through checkpoints, surveillance, and discriminatory zoning within the city itself (Rumford, 2008). Consequently, the pursuit of spatial justice in these contexts requires a radical rethinking of urban citizenship that transcends the nation-state, focusing instead on the "right to inhabit" as the primary claim to urban resources.

The primary objective of this study is to evaluate the spatial dimensions of refugee integration in border cities through the lens of justice and equity. Specifically, the research seeks to answer how refugees experience and perceive urban space, moving beyond a "deficit model" of displacement to recognize their active role in co-

producing the city. It further interrogates the institutional factors—such as restrictive land-use policies or lack of multi-modal transport—that constrain integration. By posing these questions, the study aims to uncover how spatial justice can inform more resilient and inclusive urban policy, moving from emergency response to sustainable urbanism. This requires an analysis of the "lived space" of refugees, identifying the micro-tactics they use to navigate hostile urban environments and claim their place within the city.

Furthermore, this research explores the intersectional nature of displacement, acknowledging that the experience of the city is dictated by gender, age, and legal status. A spatial justice approach reveals that "universal" planning often fails to account for the specific vulnerabilities of refugee women or the youth, who may face different barriers to mobility and public participation (Valentine, 2004). By disaggregating the refugee experience, the study highlights the need for a "pluralistic urbanism" that recognizes the diverse ways in which displaced populations interact with the built environment. This focus ensures that integration policies are not monolithic but are responsive to the varied socio-spatial needs of a heterogeneous refugee population, fostering a more equitable distribution of the city's "social surplus."

Conceptually, this study advances the discourse by explicitly linking the "Right to the City" with the specificities of refugee mobility, proposing a novel theoretical bridge between migration studies and spatial justice. Historically, migration studies have focused on the socio-economic and legal dimensions of integration, while urban planning has often treated refugees as a logistical problem. By centering spatial justice, we can see the city as a site of potential emancipation where the built environment acts as a conduit for human rights. This contribution is particularly relevant in the "neoliberal city," where public spaces are increasingly privatized, further marginalizing those who lack formal economic power. The study argues that reclaiming public space for refugees is a prerequisite for reclaiming the city for all marginalized groups.

The study holds significant policy relevance; by identifying the spatial mechanisms that foster inclusion, it provides actionable recommendations for municipal leaders and international NGOs. Moving beyond the "encampment" logic, the research advocates for "integrated urbanism," where refugee support is woven into general municipal services. This not only benefits the displaced but also strengthens the urban resilience of the host community by improving infrastructure and social services at the neighborhood scale. Ultimately, the quest for spatial justice in border cities is about more than just housing or jobs; it is about creating an urban environment

where every inhabitant, regardless of their origin, has the power to participate in the making and remaking of their city (Lefebvre, 1968).

B. Literature Review

1. *Urban Integration of Refugees: Socio-Spatial Dynamics*

The transition from camp-based humanitarianism to urban refugee integration represents a significant shift in global migration patterns. Urban integration is a multi-dimensional process involving the negotiation of housing, employment, mobility, and social services within the pre-existing structures of the host city (Zetter & Boano, 2010). Unlike the controlled environment of a camp, the city offers refugees a "right to anonymity," but this often comes at the cost of legal and social invisibility. Access to dignified housing remains the primary hurdle, as refugees are frequently funneled into "slums of hope" or dilapidated inner-city tenements through informal rental markets (Sanyal, 2014). These housing conditions are not merely logistical failures but are symptomatic of a broader "urban precarity" where the right to shelter is decoupled from the right to security and health.

Furthermore, the integration into urban labor markets is often characterized by extreme informalization and exploitation. Refugees typically occupy the "sub-proletariat" tier of the city, performing essential but undervalued labor in the informal economy without legal protections (Sassen, 2001). This economic marginalization is intrinsically linked to spatial constraints; without affordable and efficient mobility options, refugees are often unable to access employment centers located far from their residential enclaves. Consequently, inclusion becomes a "spatial lottery," where the location of one's dwelling dictates their potential for socio-economic upward mobility (Darling, 2017).

Barriers to inclusion are particularly acute in informal or peripheral areas where the state's presence is minimal. In these "zones of exclusion," refugees must rely on self-organized community networks to compensate for the lack of formal social services (Betts et al., 2017). While these networks provide essential "social capital," they can also lead to the formation of ethnic enclaves that are physically and socially disconnected from the broader urban fabric. This spatial segregation is often reinforced by host-community hostilities and exclusionary zoning policies that view refugee settlements as a threat to urban order rather than a vital part of the city's social reproduction (Fawaz, 2017).

2. Border Cities as Urban Frontiers

Border cities function as unique "urban frontiers," characterized by their role as first points of entry and sites of permanent liminality. These cities often suffer from chronic infrastructure deficits, as their growth is frequently driven by sudden, large-scale displacement rather than proactive planning (Brun, 2015). The "urbanization of the border" creates a landscape where the physical boundary of the nation-state is internalized within the city's infrastructure, manifesting as checkpoints, surveillance zones, and transit hubs that regulate refugee movement (Rumford, 2008). This socio-political marginalization renders border cities as "secondary cities," often neglected by national governments, which exacerbates the competition for limited resources between refugees and the local urban poor.

The economic challenges of border urbanism are further complicated by the volatile nature of cross-border mobility. Refugees in these cities often maintain "transnational lives," relying on economic links to their countries of origin while attempting to build new lives in the host city (Agier, 2011). However, the securitization of the border frequently disrupts these vital economic flows, pushing refugees deeper into informality. The border city thus becomes a site of "suspended citizenship," where inhabitants live in a state of constant transition, hindered by institutional frameworks that favor "containment" over "integration" (Brambilla, 2015).

3. Spatial Justice in Urban Studies

The concept of Spatial Justice provides a critical framework for evaluating how the built environment reproduces or mitigates inequality. As Soja (2010) argues, spatial justice is not an abstract philosophical goal but a concrete requirement for the equitable distribution of urban resources. For displaced populations, spatial justice is synonymous with the "Right to the City"—the right to inhabit, occupy, and transform urban space according to their needs (Lefebvre, 1968; Marcuse, 2009). This necessitates a move away from "charity-based" planning toward a "rights-based" approach, where the provision of water, transit, and public space is viewed as a fundamental entitlement of urban residency, regardless of nationality.

Spatial justice is also deeply connected to social cohesion and human dignity. When refugees are confined to peripheral areas with poor environmental quality, it sends a clear signal of social devaluation (Dikeç, 2001). Conversely, the creation of "inclusive public spaces"—where refugees and host communities can engage in spontaneous social exchange—fosters an "urbanism of encounter" that builds mutual trust (Fincher & Iveson, 2008). By ensuring that refugees have the

"spatial agency" to access the city's social and economic core, planners can transform the city into a site of emancipation rather than a site of confinement.

In the context of the Anthropocene and global displacement, spatial justice also encompasses "environmental justice." Refugees are often forced to settle in hazardous urban zones—such as floodplains or industrial wastelands—that are prone to climate-related disasters (Pelling, 2011). A justice-oriented framework demands that urban resilience strategies explicitly include displaced populations, ensuring that they are not the first victims of environmental degradation. Thus, the pursuit of spatial justice in the city is an essential component of upholding the broader spectrum of human rights in the 21st century.

4. *Gaps in Existing Research: The Need for Transregional Analysis*

Despite the growing body of literature on migration, there remains a significant lack of transregional comparisons that bridge the gap between the Global North and Global South. Most studies on refugee integration are confined to specific national contexts, failing to capture the universal spatial mechanisms—such as "informalization" or "peripheralization"—that define refugee urbanism globally (Hatziprokopiou et al., 2016). A cross-continental approach is necessary to understand how different municipal governance models (from decentralized systems in Europe to informalized systems in the Middle East) navigate the tensions between security and inclusion.

Furthermore, the spatial dimensions of refugee integration remain underexplored compared to the legal and economic dimensions. While social scientists have extensively documented the policy failures of integration, there is a lack of "spatial evidence"—such as mapping of refugee mobilities or analysis of micro-design interventions—that can inform actual urban planning practice (Boano & Martén, 2016). Without this spatial focus, integration policies remain abstract and disconnected from the lived reality of the urban refugee experience.

Finally, few studies have successfully linked border urbanism with justice-oriented frameworks. Most literature on border cities focuses on security and surveillance, while literature on spatial justice often focuses on established citizens in "global cities." There is a critical need for research that applies Spatial Justice to the "liminal spaces" of the border city, recognizing that these "urban frontiers" are where the most urgent struggles for human dignity and urban rights are taking place (Madanipour, 2010; Holston, 2008). This study seeks to fill these

gaps by providing an integrated, transregional analysis of the spatial politics of refugee integration.

C. Theoretical Framework

1. *Spatial Justice and Urban Equity: The Production of Inclusion*

The theoretical underpinnings of this study are rooted in the "spatial turn" of critical social theory, which posits that justice is not merely a social or legal abstraction but is physically and geographically produced. Central to this framework is Henri Lefebvre's (1968) concept of the "Right to the City," which argues that urban space is a social product and that all inhabitants—regardless of legal status—possess the right to participate in its creation and appropriation. This perspective challenges the view of the city as a neutral container, suggesting instead that the city is a site of constant struggle over the "right to be seen" and the "right to inhabit."

David Harvey (2008) expands this by framing the right to the city as a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. Harvey argues that the quality of urban life is a commodity, and those without capital are often excluded from its benefits. In the context of refugee integration, this implies that justice is achieved only when displaced populations can move beyond "mere presence" to active "inhabitation," where they can claim the city as a site of social reproduction and political encounter, rather than being treated as temporary guests of the state.

Building upon these foundations, Edward Soja (2010) developed the concept of Spatial Justice to describe the equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources and the opportunities to use them. Soja posits that the spatial organization of the city can be inherently unjust, reinforcing social hierarchies through geographical distance and segregation. In border cities, spatial justice serves as a critical diagnostic tool to evaluate the "geographies of inequality" that refugees navigate on a daily basis.

Indicators of inclusion within a spatial justice framework are measured by the accessibility of essential resources: the proximity of housing to labor markets, the permeability of public transit networks, and the non-discriminatory access to healthcare and education. When refugees are systematically relegated to "spatial voids" or underserved peripheries, it constitutes a form of "territorial stigmatization" that undermines the democratic potential of the urban fabric (Wacquant, 2008). This geographic exclusion acts as a physical barrier to the legal rights refugees are theoretically granted.

2. Refugees as Urban Actors: Agency and Everyday Practice

This study departs from the "victim-centered" narrative of displacement, instead conceptualizing refugees as Active Urban Actors. Drawing on the "new sociology of childhood" and broader theories of subaltern agency, this framework recognizes that refugees do not simply occupy space; they actively produce and adapt it through Everyday Practices (de Certeau, 1984). These practices—ranging from the informal modification of housing to the creation of grassroots social networks—represent a form of "quiet encroachment" (Bayat, 2010).

Through these micro-tactics, refugees negotiate the constraints of the host city, transforming hostile or indifferent environments into "meaningful places" of belonging and survival. This bottom-up production of space demonstrates that refugees are not just passive recipients of aid but are active participants in the urban economy and social life. Their ability to repurpose urban "waste" or "gray spaces" into functional dwellings or markets showcases a high degree of spatial resilience and innovative adaptation.

The agency of refugees is further expressed through the Contestation of Marginalization. Even in states of extreme legal precarity, refugees exercise what James Holston (2008) calls "insurgent citizenship" by asserting their presence in public spaces and demanding access to urban life. This participation is often informal and non-institutional, yet it fundamentally reshapes the city's social ecology. By claiming visibility in plazas, streets, and markets, refugees challenge the "border-work" that seeks to keep them at the margins.

By analyzing these acts of adaptation and participation, the research highlights how refugees transition from being "objects of humanitarian concern" to "subjects of urban change." This agency is a critical indicator of integration, as it demonstrates the capacity of displaced populations to navigate and potentially subvert the institutional barriers of the border city. Their presence forces the city to evolve, creating new cultural and economic nodes that would not exist in a homogeneous, static urban environment.

3. Border Cities and Peripheral Urbanism: Liminality and Governance

The border city is theorized here as a Liminal Space—a site of permanent transit and "in-betweenness" where the rules of the nation-state and the needs of the urban inhabitant are in constant friction. Drawing on Michel Foucault's (1986) concept of "Heterotopia," the border city acts as a space of otherness that mirrors and yet contradicts the rest of the nation. These cities are where the "State of Exception"

(Agamben, 2005) is often most visible, as emergency migration policies override standard municipal governance.

These cities often exemplify Peripheral Urbanism, characterized by rapid, unplanned growth and a high degree of informality. In these contexts, governance is often fragmented, caught between national security mandates focused on "containment" and municipal pressures to provide "integration" (Agier, 2011). This tension creates a state of "permanent temporariness" (Hanafi, 2008) for refugees, who may live for years in a legal and spatial limbo, physically present in the city but excluded from its formal social contracts.

Spatial Segregation and Informal Settlements are the primary physical manifestations of this liminality. Because formal housing markets are often inaccessible to refugees due to legal or financial barriers, they are frequently pushed into "gray spaces" (Yiftachel, 2009). These territories exist between the legal and the illegal, the planned and the unplanned, often lacking the most basic municipal infrastructure such as piped water, sanitation, or reliable electricity.

These informal settlements in border cities are not merely sites of poverty; they are complex socio-spatial configurations that reflect both the failures of the state and the resilience of the displaced. They function as "arrival neighborhoods" where the social capital of refugee networks facilitates the first steps of integration. However, the lack of formal recognition means these areas are often vulnerable to demolition or neglect, further destabilizing the lives of those seeking safety.

The governance of these peripheral spaces remains a significant challenge, as they often fall into a jurisdictional "no-man's land." While municipal authorities may lack the resources to provide services, national governments may intentionally withhold them to discourage permanent settlement. This "politics of neglect" is a primary obstacle to spatial justice, as it ensures that the most vulnerable urban inhabitants remain in a state of precarious survival.

4.   *Intersecting Frameworks: The Urban Frontier*

Synthesizing these three frameworks allows us to view the border city as an Urban Frontier, where the struggle for spatial justice is fought through the daily practices of refugee actors. It is here that the abstract rights of international law meet the concrete reality of urban paving and zoning. The frontier is a site of both intense exclusion and remarkable social innovation, where new forms of urban belonging are constantly being negotiated and rewritten.

Ultimately, the quest for urban equity in these contexts requires a shift from "management" to "justice." By acknowledging refugees as

legitimate urban actors and the border city as a permanent site of inhabitation, planners can move toward a more inclusive urbanism. This requires a move beyond the "camp logic" of containment and toward a "city logic" of integration, where the right to the city is recognized as a fundamental human right for all who dwell within its borders.

D. Methodology

1. Research Design: A Comparative, Multi-Sited Approach

This study employs a comparative, multi-sited, and mixed-methods research design to investigate the spatial dimensions of refugee integration across diverse geopolitical contexts. By utilizing a comparative framework, the research identifies universal mechanisms of "peripheralization" while remaining sensitive to local socio-political specificities. The rationale for selecting Cúcuta (Colombia) and Lesvos (Greece) as primary field sites lies in their status as prototypical "urban frontiers." Cúcuta serves as the principal entry point for the Venezuelan exodus, characterized by high levels of urban informality and rapid cross-border movement. In contrast, Lesvos (specifically Mytilene) represents a European "border city" defined by the logic of containment, securitization, and more institutionalized, yet often exclusionary, governance. Together, these sites offer a robust transregional perspective on the friction between migration and spatial justice.

2. Spatial Analysis: Mapping Margins and Mobilities

Spatial analysis forms the quantitative core of the methodology, utilizing Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to visualize the socio-spatial configuration of displacement. The research maps the location of informal refugee settlements in relation to essential municipal services, such as healthcare centers, schools, and labor hubs. Furthermore, the study identifies "mobility routes" used by refugees to navigate the city, highlighting bottlenecks and areas of high risk. By layering demographic data with physical infrastructure maps, the analysis pinpoints specific "areas of exclusion" where geographic distance and poor connectivity reinforce the socio-economic marginalization of displaced populations.

3. Policy Review: Frameworks of Inclusion and Exclusion

A systematic policy review is conducted to evaluate the institutional landscape of refugee integration. This involves a comparative analysis of national legislation—such as Colombia's Temporary Protection Statute and the EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum—and their localized implementation through municipal urban

planning frameworks. The review focuses on "spatial inclusion measures," such as zoning laws, social housing allocations, and public space mandates. By examining these documents, the study identifies contradictions between humanitarian rhetoric and the restrictive realities of urban land-use policies that often maintain refugees in a state of legal and spatial limbo.

4. Semi-Structured Interviews: Capturing Lived Experience

To capture the "lived space" of the city, the study utilizes semi-structured interviews with three primary groups of stakeholders. First, in-depth interviews with refugees explore their daily navigation of the city, their perceptions of safety, and their micro-tactics for claiming urban space. Second, local authorities and urban planners provide insight into the institutional challenges of managing rapid demographic shifts. Third, NGO representatives offer a perspective on the informal social safety nets that emerge in the absence of state intervention. These interviews prioritize the "refugee voice," moving beyond a deficit model to recognize their role as active urban actors and co-producers of the city.

5. Data Analysis: Coding, Comparison, and Triangulation

The analysis follows a rigorous process of thematic coding for qualitative data, utilizing software to identify recurring patterns related to spatial agency, institutional barriers, and social cohesion. This is complemented by a comparative spatial analysis that contrasts the physical accessibility scores of Cúcuta and Lesvos. Finally, the findings are subjected to data triangulation, where qualitative insights from interviews are cross-referenced with GIS mapping and policy data. This holistic approach ensures that the resulting analysis is both deep in human experience and broad in structural context, providing a multidimensional view of spatial justice.

6. Ethical Considerations: Navigating Vulnerability

Research involving displaced populations necessitates a high degree of ethical sensitivity. This study adheres to the principles of informed consent and confidentiality, ensuring that all participants are aware of the research objectives and that their identities are protected—a crucial measure in contexts of legal precarity. The methodology is designed to be sensitive to the trauma and vulnerability of refugee populations, avoiding extractive research practices. Furthermore, the researcher maintains a high level of reflexivity, acknowledging their own positionality and the power dynamics

inherent in cross-cultural, transregional research within the Global South and North.

7.   *Limitations: Context and Barriers*

While the comparative design offers significant insights, it is subject to certain limitations. Findings are necessarily context-specific; the socio-spatial dynamics of Cúcuta may not perfectly translate to other Latin American contexts, nor Mytilene to other Mediterranean hubs. Language and cultural barriers also present challenges, necessitating the use of local interpreters and cultural mediators to ensure the accuracy of qualitative data. Additionally, the fluid and often informal nature of refugee settlements means that GIS data captures a "snapshot" of a rapidly changing urban environment, requiring the research to acknowledge the temporal limitations of its spatial findings.

E.   Case Study Contexts

1.   *Cúcuta, Colombia: The Urbanization of the Venezuelan Exodus*

Cúcuta, the capital of the Norte de Santander department, serves as the most critical land gateway for the Venezuelan migrant and refugee crisis. Unlike traditional "camp-based" displacement, the influx in Cúcuta is characterized by a rapid, mass-scale urbanization of refuge, where hundreds of thousands of individuals have integrated into the city's pre-existing informal structures. The city operates as a "double frontier"—a site of transit for *caminantes* (walkers) heading deeper into the continent and a site of settlement for those unable to move further. This sudden demographic shift has placed an unprecedented strain on municipal resources, turning the city into a living laboratory for urban resilience under pressure.

The physical landscape of Cúcuta is defined by significant infrastructure, housing, and service gaps. Most refugees settle in *asentamientos informales* (informal settlements) on the urban periphery, such as the *Comuna 6* and *Comuna 7* districts, which lack paved roads, reliable electricity, and piped water. These areas are often located on steep, geologically unstable terrain, exacerbating environmental risks. Because the formal housing market is inaccessible due to high costs and documentation requirements, refugees rely on "room-sharing" or informal sub-letting, leading to severe overcrowding. These spatial gaps create a "geography of exclusion" where the most vulnerable inhabitants are physically disconnected from the city's economic core.

Despite these structural deficiencies, Cúcuta has become a hub for local and NGO-led integration initiatives. Colombia's innovative *Estatuto Temporal de Protección* (ETPV) provides a legal framework for regularizaton, but its spatial implementation relies heavily on international cooperation. Organizations like the UNHCR and various local foundations have established "Integration Centers" that provide legal aid, healthcare, and vocational training directly within the peripheral settlements. Furthermore, grassroots initiatives have emerged where refugees and host communities co-manage "community kitchens" and informal daycare centers. These bottom-up efforts represent the primary mechanism for reclaiming "spatial justice" in a context where formal municipal planning often lags behind the reality of the crisis.

2. Lesvos, Greece: The Mediterranean Frontier and the Logic of Containment

Lesvos, situated at the edge of the Aegean Sea, represents a fundamental site of the European refugee crisis, primarily hosting individuals fleeing conflict in Syria, Afghanistan, and the Middle East. Unlike the informal urban sprawl of Cúcuta, the context in Lesvos is defined by the logic of containment. The island serves as a "hotspot"—a mandatory processing zone intended to prevent movement to the Greek mainland or northern Europe. This has resulted in the creation of massive, institutionalized structures like the (now defunct) Moria camp and the subsequent Mavrovouni site. These sites function as "total institutions," where the spatial design is dictated by surveillance, security, and the regulation of movement rather than long-term integration.

The spatial configuration of Lesvos is a patchwork of temporary camps, informal settlements, and urban interfaces. While the formal camps are located on the island's outskirts, the capital city of Mytilene serves as the primary urban interface where refugees interact with the local population. Informal "overflow" settlements often emerge in the olive groves surrounding the camps, characterized by a complete lack of sanitation and extreme weather vulnerability. In Mytilene itself, refugees navigate a delicate social landscape, seeking "pockets of normalcy" in public squares and local markets. This urban-camp friction creates a state of "permanent temporariness," where the built environment acts as a barrier to social cohesion and human dignity.

The socio-spatial experience of refugees is deeply affected by EU and local policies affecting spatial inclusion. The "EU-Turkey Statement" and the subsequent "closed-controlled" camp models have institutionalized segregation, physically separating refugees from the

social fabric of the island. While some local NGOs have attempted to create "open" housing projects within Mytilene to foster integration, these efforts often face significant political pushback and funding constraints. The policy landscape in Lesvos is one of "contained mobility," where spatial justice is actively subverted by high-level geopolitical agreements that prioritize border security over the right to the city. This creates a landscape of "heterotopia," where the refugee is physically present on European soil but spatially and legally excluded from the European community.

F. Discussion

1. Challenging the "State of Exception" in Urban Planning

The empirical evidence from Cúcuta and Lesvos suggests that border cities increasingly operate within a "state of exception" (Agamben, 2005), where standard urban planning protocols are suspended in favor of emergency management. In Lesvos, this is manifested through the securitization of the "hotspot" model, which treats the refugee body as a logistical unit rather than an urban citizen. In Cúcuta, the exception is found in the state's tactical withdrawal from informal settlements, leaving refugees to navigate a "regulatory void." This suspension of normal planning processes effectively denies refugees the legal and spatial protections afforded to "regular" citizens, reinforcing a hierarchy of human value within the built environment.

Furthermore, this research challenges the "management" paradigm that dominates current urban responses to migration. By framing refugees as a "crisis" to be contained, municipal authorities overlook the long-term reality of permanent settlement. This perspective aligns with Lefebvre's (1968) critique of "Conceived Space"— the abstracted, top-down mapped city of planners—which often fails to account for the "Lived Space" of marginalized populations. When planning remains reactive and exclusionary, it creates "fractured urbanisms" where the benefits of city life are hoarded by the core, while the periphery is left to absorb the social and environmental costs of displacement.

The identification of "spatial voids" in both cities highlights a form of "territorial stigmatization" (Wacquant, 2008), where the geographic location of refugees becomes a marker of their social exclusion. In Mytilene, the visibility of refugees in central squares is met with surveillance, while in Cúcuta, the invisibility of the periphery results in neglect. This dynamic suggests that "safety" in urban planning is often defined through the lens of the host community's comfort rather than the refugee's protection. To counter this, urban planning must transition toward a "rights-based approach" that recognizes the

presence of refugees not as a temporary anomaly, but as a catalyst for urban evolution.

Reframing safety also requires a deconstruction of the "risk" discourse that justifies segregation. In Lesvos, the placement of camps far from urban centers is justified through the logic of "public order," yet this very distance increases the vulnerability of refugees to violence and health crises. In Cúcuta, the lack of infrastructure in informal zones is often blamed on "geological risk," yet this risk is compounded by the state's refusal to provide formal tenure or basic services. Thus, the built environment is used as a tool to perform "border-work" (Rumford, 2008) within the city, internalizing the national boundary through physical and institutional barriers.

Finally, challenging adult-centric and host-centric planning requires the inclusion of refugee voices as "co-producers of urban knowledge." As Sandercock (2003) argues, the "mongrel city" of the 21st century requires a planning ethos that embraces diversity and conflict as creative forces. By acknowledging that refugees possess a unique "spatial literacy" gained through their navigation of hostile landscapes, planners can identify systemic failures in the urban fabric that affect all marginalized groups. This shift from "designing for" to "designing with" is the first step in dismantling the exclusionary structures of the border city and moving toward a more pluralistic urban future.

2. *The Right to the City as a Claim for Spatial Justice*

The findings demonstrate that for refugees, the "Right to the City" is an enacted claim rather than a granted legal status. Drawing on Purcell's (2003) reimagining of urban citizenship, this study posits that the right to inhabit and participate in the city should be decoupled from the nation-state. In Cúcuta, the "quiet encroachment" (Bayat, 2010) of refugees into the informal economy and housing market represents a bottom-up assertion of this right. These actors are not waiting for legal regularisation to claim their space; they are actively producing the city through their daily survival, effectively challenging the neoliberal boundaries of the urban commons.

Spatial justice, as defined by Soja (2010), is achieved when the "social surplus" of the city is distributed equitably. In border cities, this surplus is often denied to refugees through "spatial enclosure"—the physical and legal barriers that prevent access to transit, labor, and leisure. The comparative analysis shows that while European contexts use "securitized enclosure" (camps), Latin American contexts often use "neglectful enclosure" (unserviced peripheries). Both models result in a violation of the UNCRC and UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which mandate the right to mobility and a dignified standard of living.

Justice, therefore, requires a redistribution of spatial power that validates the presence of the displaced.

The "Right to the City" also encompasses the right to appropriation, which for refugees often means the creative repurposing of "dead zones" or "gray spaces" (Yiftachel, 2009). When refugees in Cúcuta transform a vacant hillside into a vibrant community hub, they are performing a radical act of urbanism that resists their erasure. This appropriation is a vital indicator of "Environmental Competence" (Kyttä, 2004), as it demonstrates the ability of marginalized actors to transform hostile environments into meaningful places. However, without formal policy support, these appropriations remain precarious and subject to the whims of municipal "cleanup" operations or private development.

Intergenerational justice further complicates this claim. The "spatial legacy" of current planning decisions will dictate the opportunities for refugee children for decades to come. If the youth are raised in segregated, underserved enclaves, the city is effectively reproducing a cycle of "inherited marginality." As Harvey (2012) notes, the right to the city is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. For refugee families, this means the city must provide the "spatial affordances" necessary for upward mobility—safe schools, accessible parks, and reliable transit. A city that fails its youngest and most vulnerable inhabitants fails the promise of sustainable urbanism.

Ultimately, the pursuit of spatial justice in border cities requires an "ethics of care" (Tronto, 1993) to be integrated into urban governance. This involves recognizing the interdependence of refugees and host communities. In Cúcuta, the shared struggle for services in informal settlements has occasionally led to cross-cultural solidarity, proving that the "urban commons" can be a site of reconciliation. By centering the needs of the displaced, planners can create more resilient and compassionate cities that benefit the entire social body, proving that the "refugee crisis" is actually a "crisis of urban justice" that demands a radical spatial response.

3. *Comparative Insights: Governance, Infrastructure, and Informality*

The comparative analysis of Cúcuta and Lesvos provides a critical lens into how different "regimes of mobility" (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013) shape the refugee experience. In the European model (Lesvos), integration is hindered by a high-resource "surveillance infrastructure" that prioritizes containment over community-building. In the Latin American model (Cúcuta), the challenge is "infrastructure poverty," where the state's inability to provide basic services creates a landscape

of precarious survival. This suggests that "wealthy" urbanisms are not inherently more just; rather, they may possess more sophisticated tools for exclusion, while "informal" urbanisms may offer more porous, albeit dangerous, pathways for inclusion.

The role of informality emerges as a central theme in this comparison. In Cúcuta, informality acts as a "buffer" that allows refugees to enter the urban fabric quickly through self-built housing and street vending. While this leads to precarity, it also allows for a level of spatial agency that is completely stripped away in the institutionalized "hotspots" of Greece. As Sanyal (2014) argues, the "urbanization of refuge" requires planners to rethink informality not as a problem to be solved, but as a logic of survival that must be supported and formalized through "incremental planning" and tenure security.

Furthermore, the governance gaps identified in both cities reflect a broader tension between national sovereignty and municipal responsibility. In Lesvos, the municipal government is often at odds with EU-level mandates, while in Cúcuta, the local government is overwhelmed by national-level neglect. This "multi-scalar friction" prevents the implementation of coherent integration policies. For spatial justice to occur, there must be a "rescaling of governance" that empowers border cities with the financial and legal tools to treat refugees as urban residents rather than national security threats. This involves a shift from "border-work" to "city-work."

Comparative insights also highlight the gendered and age-specific dimensions of spatial exclusion. In both cities, refugee women reported higher levels of "spatial anxiety" in public transit and unlit peripheral zones, while youth faced barriers to "educational mobility." This suggests that "universal" integration policies often default to the needs of the "average" (often male) refugee, ignoring the intersectional nature of spatial justice. A truly inclusive border city must adopt "intersectional urbanism," ensuring that the built environment is safe and accessible for all, regardless of gender, age, or legal status.

Finally, the success of grassroots and NGO-led initiatives in both contexts provides a blueprint for "bottom-up" spatial justice. Whether it is the "Integration Centers" in Cúcuta or the "Open Housing" projects in Lesvos, these micro-interventions demonstrate that small-scale, neighborhood-focused design can foster social cohesion where grand master plans fail. These initiatives bridge the gap between "emergency relief" and "urban development," suggesting that the future of refugee integration lies in a "neighborhood-based" approach that prioritizes local encounters and the shared use of the urban commons (Madanipour, 2010).

G. Discussion

1. *Refugees and the Right to the City: Beyond Legal Status*

The empirical findings from Cúcuta and Lesvos underscore that for displaced populations, the "Right to the City" is not a static legal endowment but an enacted claim for equitable spatial inclusion. Drawing on Lefebvre's (1968) seminal framework, this study argues that the city must be viewed as a social product where the right to inhabit transcends national citizenship. In border cities, this right becomes a fundamental human rights issue; when refugees are relegated to unserviced peripheries or securitized camps, their ability to fulfill basic human needs—mobility, health, and social reproduction—is physically obstructed. Spatial justice is thus the metric by which we measure the transition of the refugee from an "object of humanitarian aid" to a "subject of urban rights" (Purcell, 2014).

This transition is primarily manifested through participatory practices and agency in urban life. Despite structural barriers, refugees in both case studies demonstrate "insurgent citizenship" (Holston, 2008) by repurposing urban "voids" into sites of economic and social exchange. In Cúcuta, the informal modification of dwellings and the establishment of street-side commerce are not merely survival tactics; they are political acts of appropriation that challenge the exclusionary zoning of the neoliberal city. By claiming visibility in the urban fabric, refugees disrupt the "border-work" that seeks to keep them marginalized, asserting their competence as active co-producers of the city's social ecology (Rumford, 2008).

However, the realization of these rights is often hindered by the "spatial paternalism" of municipal authorities. Planning regimes frequently default to a protectionist logic that silences refugee agency in favor of top-down, "sanitized" urban solutions. As Harvey (2012) notes, the right to the city is a collective power to reshape the urbanization process. For this to occur in border contexts, planning must evolve from "consultation" to "meaningful co-production," where refugees' unique spatial literacy—their granular understanding of urban bottlenecks and informal networks—is integrated into formal urban design. Without this shift, spatial inclusion remains a hollow promise, and the city continues to reproduce geographies of exclusion that violate the core principles of human dignity.

2. *Border Cities as Liminal Spaces: The Friction of Integration*

The study theorizes border cities as liminal spaces, defined by the intense tension between transitory and permanent urban integration. Border cities occupy a "state of exception" (Agamben, 2005) where

national security mandates often collide with local urban needs. In Lesvos, the institutionalized "hotspot" model embodies this liminality, treating refugees as being in a state of "permanent temporariness" (Hanafi, 2008). This design intentionality prevents refugees from rooting themselves in the urban fabric, creating "heterotopias" (Foucault, 1986) that are physically inside the city but socially and legally outside of it. This friction destabilizes the social contract, as the built environment is used to enforce a logic of containment rather than community.

Conversely, in Cúcuta, liminality is experienced through informal peripheralization. The city's governance challenges are rooted in its inability to transition from an "emergency response" mindset to one of "sustainable urban development." This creates a "limbo of neglect," where refugees are allowed to inhabit the city but are denied the infrastructure—piped water, electricity, and paved transit—that signifies formal belonging. The lack of policy coordination between national border authorities and municipal planners results in a fragmented urbanism where the "urban frontier" remains a site of precarious survival rather than a site of social upward mobility.

However, these liminal contexts also present opportunities for justice-oriented planning. Because border cities are often "secondary cities" with less rigid institutional structures than national capitals, they can serve as sites for radical urban experimentation. The success of NGO-led "pockets of inclusion" in Mytilene and community-led infrastructure in Cúcuta suggests that small-scale, neighborhood-based interventions can bypass the gridlock of national politics. Justice-oriented planning in these spaces requires a "rescaling of governance" that empowers local municipalities to treat the displaced as permanent residents, effectively transforming the border city from a site of transit into a site of intercultural encounter and long-term resilience (Sandercock, 2003).

3. *Implications for Spatial Justice: From Exclusion to Cohesion*

The ultimate implication for Spatial Justice is that the built environment is never neutral; it either acts as a conduit for rights or a tool for oppression. This study highlights the primacy of infrastructure, services, and participatory governance as the three pillars of a just city. Access to high-quality public transport, for instance, is not merely a logistical convenience but a mechanism for "spatial agency," allowing refugees to escape the "poverty traps" of the urban periphery (Soja, 2010). When services are distributed based on "presence" rather than

"status," the city effectively dismantles the territorial stigmatization that often leads to social unrest and xenophobia (Wacquant, 2008).

To reduce spatial exclusion and foster social cohesion, cities must adopt strategies that prioritize the "urban commons." This involves the creation of "neutral" public spaces—parks, libraries, and community centers—where refugees and host communities can engage in spontaneous social exchange. These "contact zones" are essential for breaking down the "us vs. them" narratives that flourish in segregated environments. Furthermore, formalizing informal settlements through incremental upgrading rather than demolition provides refugees with the tenure security needed to invest in their surroundings, transforming "slums of despair" into "neighborhoods of hope" (Sanyal, 2014).

Finally, the pursuit of spatial justice requires a "temporal ethics" in urban planning. Planners must recognize that the "temporary" camps or informal shacks of today often become the permanent neighborhoods of tomorrow. By integrating refugee needs into the long-term master plans of border cities, authorities can avoid the creation of permanent underclasses. Ultimately, a city that is safe and inclusive for a refugee—the most vulnerable of urban inhabitants—is a city that is more resilient and just for all citizens. Reclaiming the city through the lens of spatial justice is not an act of charity, but a strategic imperative for the democratic survival of the 21st-century urban world.

H. Policy and Practice Implications
1. Promoting Equitable Urban Planning

To transition from a "crisis management" mode to a "spatial justice" framework, municipal authorities must move toward integrating refugees into formal urban development strategies. This requires a radical departure from the "camp logic" of containment, instead treating refugee settlements as permanent "arrival neighborhoods" that require long-term investment. Planning departments should adopt Child and Family-Friendly Urbanism metrics, ensuring that land-use policies prioritize social infrastructure—such as schools and parks—over exclusionary zoning. By recognizing refugees as legitimate urban inhabitants in the Master Plan, cities can unlock national and international funding for permanent infrastructure, effectively bridging the gap between humanitarian aid and urban development.

Achieving equity also necessitates spatially targeted interventions for marginalized neighborhoods. Rather than implementing "one-size-fits-all" city policies, planners should utilize GIS-based "spatial justice audits" to identify specific zones of

exclusion—areas where high refugee density coincides with poor transit connectivity and environmental risk. Interventions such as incremental housing upgrades, the "legalization of informality," and the extension of "last-mile" public transport can transform peripheral enclaves into integrated urban districts. These targeted investments not only improve the lives of the displaced but also revitalize the host community's infrastructure, reducing the "spatial competition" that often fuels social tension.

2.   *Multi-Stakeholder Coordination*

The complexity of urban displacement demands a robust model of multi-stakeholder coordination that bridges the gap between NGOs, local authorities, and refugee communities. Currently, these actors often work in silos: NGOs focus on immediate relief, while local authorities focus on long-term infrastructure. A "Spatial Justice Taskforce" should be established at the municipal level to synchronize these efforts. This institutional body would ensure that NGO-funded "temporary" projects are designed with a "spatial legacy" in mind, aligning them with the city's technical standards so they can eventually be absorbed into the municipal public works system.

Furthermore, participatory planning must be institutionalized as a primary tool for inclusion. Drawing on Lundy's (2007) "Voice-Space-Audience-Influence" model, cities should move beyond tokenistic consultations toward a "co-design" process where refugees hold formal advisory power. Participatory budgeting, specifically allocated to border-zone neighborhoods, allows refugees and locals to jointly decide on community priorities. This practice fosters "spatial agency" and builds a shared sense of ownership over the urban commons. When marginalized inhabitants are given the tools to shape their physical environment, they transition from passive recipients of aid to active stakeholders in the city's democratic future.

3.   *Toward Transregional Learning*

The comparative analysis of Cúcuta and Lesvos reveals that while the contexts differ, the "mechanisms of exclusion" are remarkably similar, suggesting an urgent need for transregional learning. By sharing best practices across Latin America and Europe, cities can develop more resilient responses to displacement. For instance, European cities can learn from the "inclusive informality" and rapid regularization models found in Colombia, while Latin American cities can adapt European "integrated service" models that weave refugee support into general social welfare systems. Establishing a "Global Network of Border Cities" would facilitate this knowledge exchange,

allowing municipal leaders to bypass national-level gridlock and share "spatial solutions" directly.

Ultimately, these lessons for other border city contexts underscore that "child-friendly" and "refugee-friendly" cities are, by definition, "everyone-friendly" cities. The pursuit of spatial justice in the urban frontier serves as a diagnostic for the health of global democracy. As the world faces increasing climate-induced displacement, the border city will remain the primary site of socio-spatial negotiation. By adopting justice-oriented planning, participatory governance, and transregional cooperation, border cities can transform from sites of "suspended citizenship" into sites of "urban innovation." The future of the 21st-century city depends on our ability to design for the most vulnerable, ensuring that the "Right to the City" is a universal reality, not a geographic privilege.

I. Conclusion

1. Summary of Key Findings

This study has demonstrated that the urban integration of refugees in border cities is fundamentally a spatial struggle defined by systemic exclusion and resilient adaptation. The empirical analysis of Cúcuta and Lesvos reveals that refugees face a "triple threat" of spatial, social, and institutional exclusion. Spatially, they are relegated to the urban periphery or securitized enclaves, physically disconnected from the resources that enable upward mobility. Socially, they navigate a landscape of discrimination where the built environment is used to perform "border-work" within the city. Institutionally, they are caught in a "state of exception," where bureaucratic hurdles and lack of policy coordination maintain them in a state of permanent temporariness (Agamben, 2005; Hanafi, 2008).

However, the research also highlights that the city remains a site of potential emancipation. Community initiatives—ranging from informal housing modifications to grassroots social networks—serve as the primary drivers of integration and social cohesion. These acts of "quiet encroachment" (Bayat, 2010) and "insurgent citizenship" (Holston, 2008) prove that refugees are not passive beneficiaries of aid but active co-producers of the urban fabric. By adapting public spaces for social exchange and economic survival, these communities reclaim their Right to the City, demonstrating that spatial justice is often achieved from the bottom-up when formal planning systems fail.

2. Contributions to Scholarship

This research makes a significant conceptual contribution by combining migration studies with the framework of urban spatial

justice. While migration literature often prioritizes legal and economic indicators of integration, this study asserts that "justice" is a geographic production. By applying the theories of Lefebvre (1968) and Soja (2010) to the specificities of forced displacement, the study provides a diagnostic tool for measuring how urban design and land-use policies either facilitate or hinder human rights. It moves the discourse from "refugee management" toward "spatial rights," advocating for an urbanism that recognizes the right to inhabit as the primary claim to the city.

Furthermore, the transregional comparative perspective between Latin America and Europe highlights the global relevance of border urbanism. By contrasting the "inclusive informality" of Cúcuta with the "exclusive institutionalization" of Lesvos, the study identifies universal patterns of peripheralization that transcend local geopolitics. This comparative lens allows for the identification of a "global refugee urbanism"—a distinct form of peripheral urbanism defined by the friction between national border security and municipal integration. This scholarship challenges the Eurocentric bias in urban theory, providing a more pluralistic understanding of how cities respond to the 21st century's most pressing demographic challenges.

3.   *Future Research Directions*

To build upon the findings of this study, longitudinal tracking of integration outcomes is essential. Most research on refugee urbanism provides a "snapshot" of a crisis; future studies should monitor how "temporary" settlements evolve into permanent neighborhoods over decades, and whether the spatial agency observed in the first generation translates into socio-economic mobility for the second. Additionally, there is an urgent need for more intersectional analyses that disaggregate the refugee experience by gender, age, and legal status. As this study hinted, the "Right to the City" is experienced differently by refugee women, children, and those with varied documentation levels, requiring "intersectional urbanism" to be a core pillar of future planning research.

Finally, the evaluation of participatory planning approaches in border contexts remains a burgeoning frontier. While this study advocates for co-design, further research is needed to determine which specific tools—such as digital mapping, participatory budgeting, or youth councils—are most effective in high-pressure, resource-constrained border environments. By refining these methods, future scholarship can provide municipal leaders with a "toolkit for justice," ensuring that the border city is transformed from a site of suspended citizenship into a site of inclusive innovation. Reclaiming the city

through the lens of spatial justice is not merely a research agenda; it is a prerequisite for a more compassionate and resilient global urban future.

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