

The Liminal Space: A Photographic Exploration of Life in Home Office Accommodations

The story of the UK is a story of migration. There has been no time when this country has not received migrants, who have shaped British history and created the diverse and multifaceted population we see today. The violence and discrimination asylum-seekers have faced on systemic and social levels is not new, and continues to become more intense with borders becoming tighter, with asylum-seekers pigeonholed into fewer places in UK society. Asylum seekers arrive in the UK carrying their fear and pain, as well as their hopes and dreams of establishing a new life. Yet they are faced with administrative and political obstacles upon their arrival, as a means of swaying their choice to remain. Over the past three years, the government has decided to accommodate asylum seekers in hotels and hostels, a shift from the previous process, where people were accommodated in shared houses within the community.

In an attempt to survey the conditions in Home Office hotels, Migrant Voice published a report on the situation in April 2023, finding that nearly half of all those seeking asylum in the UK were placed into these hotels.

The hotels are meant to be “contingency accommodation,” by the Home Office terms, and serve as a means of keeping asylum seekers in precarious housing while it deals with a “backlog” of asylum claims. As asylum seekers wait for decisions on their claim, they have no choice about where they are accommodated, nor do they have the right to be housed by a local authority. Under Section 95 of The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, the government has the obligation to house asylum seekers. However, this right is curtailed by the arbitrary decision of being sent out to places which are managed by private contractors who know little about their needs. Much of the process is arbitrary and the asylum seekers’ right of movement as well as the right to be part of the local community is systematically removed. This means that they are placed in this “contingency accommodation”, which also includes such inhumane places as barges and former military camps.





These asylum seekers face a dismal living situation, with no right to work, almost no weekly financial support (about 9 pounds per week in some of the hotels), and indefinite waiting periods for the Home Office decision. Additionally, they are largely unable to travel, due to their financial situation.

These conditions result in a tortuous, and harmful, limbo for asylum seekers in the UK, paired with constant fear of their unknown future and status. Often, they are simultaneously trying to navigate a new life in a foreign country, a new language, and trauma all while facing immense bureaucracy.



In the spring of 2023, Migrant Voice reached out to some of the asylum seekers who had been coming to workshops and meetings about the hotels they were living in. At these meetings, many expressed frustrations with their situation, including the extremely poor-quality food, sleeping conditions, and hostility from some hotel staff. Often, they were being moved from one hotel to another, far from accessible transport links or convenient shops, for indeterminate amounts of time, and with barely any notice at times. The living standards of the hotels varied greatly and seemed to be under no form of unilateral management.



When speaking to the asylum seekers, the consensus was that of feelings of despair, and resignation with their situation, seeing no end in sight, to their substandard quality of life, with no ability to work and improve it. Some of those placed in inadequate accommodation had children, who were made sick with the food, or pre-existing health ailments which deteriorated further in the hotels with no proper care.





Yet, many asylum seekers were still searching for solutions despite the gravity of the situation. They had made efforts to work with organisations like Migrant Voice, to ensure that their voices were heard and their fears were understood. They were keen to assist with further campaigns spreading awareness of the failures of the Home Office to accommodate them properly. Despite many of them being strangers to one another, they were forging connections and solidarity among themselves. They still managed to joke with each other and share anecdotes from their day to day lives. Despite extreme hardships, a degree of mundanity in the day-to-day could still exist for people who were simply hoping for a better life.

It was clear that those in hotels needed something which would help them reclaim their own voices, and amplify them so that the world could hear what they were going through. Rather than being seen through the lens of hostile media coverage or political posturing, they needed a way to showcase their stories, their lives, their humanity.

Migrant Voice met with several groups of asylum seekers on multiple occasions, finding out the best, and most effective, way in which they could work with the asylum seekers to help them do just that. These meetings led to Migrant Voice proposing a project where asylum-seekers would be supplied with disposable cameras which they could use to capture and document any aspect of their lives. Their only guidance was to take pictures of anything they had experienced in their days, whether that be their life in the hotels, their food, or where they spent their time. Artistic licence was encouraged, and some participants had a vision in mind of what message they wanted to convey, while others took a stream of consciousness approach.

The photos reflect an aspect of the asylum seekers' lives that exists outside of their political or socio-economic standing. The time they spend living in the hotels is a liminal space in their lives, where they are unable to move forward with their own personal aspirations outside of having their status granted. What the photos provide access to is a part of a human psyche that is personal, emotional, and layered. These images are not portraying the time asylum-seekers have spent campaigning or filling out paperwork. They are images of a daily, mundane existence that anyone at any time may experience.



What makes this project interesting, is not just the photos themselves, but the agency taken by the asylum-seekers in creating their own narratives around their identity, their lives, and what living in the UK might mean to them. Each frame's interpretation can be left largely to the viewer, but that in itself is a reclaim of agency. The photos do not necessarily have to mean anything in a climate where asylum-seekers are politicised for existing.



In the photos, we can see a range of scenes ranging from walks through local parks, to reheated meals, to friends gathering in each other's rooms and sharing hobbies. Using film cameras allows them to exist frozen in time, in a way that capturing on a digital or phone camera would not.

As you browse through these pictures we invite you to immerse yourself in the lives of asylum-seekers in Home Office hotels. These photos are a witness to a time when people's lives were treated as less than worthy, and their mental and physical health is taking a serious toll. The days go by unnoticeable. Imagine a living situation where you are not allowed to work, or maintain any sort of income. You are uncertain of your right to live in a country, and you have no information on when you will get news of your status.





What this series aims to convey is the emotions that can be felt through the mundanity of life in the UK for these asylum seekers, and for the viewer as well. To relate is to understand, and these photos intend to be relatable slices of life. Life in the hotels is claustrophobic, idle, and monotonous, but people do their best to escape their situation with the small pleasures of human existence. This project is the story of the immigration system in the United Kingdom.