

## **Refugees and art in the "Bijlmer-bajes": A visit to a former prison becoming a "creative refugee centre"**

Recently, an Amsterdam prison has been turned into a refugee centre. To make it a less hostile environment, artists are involved in redecorating the building and organizing activities. This combination of a former prison, refugees and art offers interesting food for thought. Placing refugees in (old) prison cells is problematic and can go terribly wrong, especially when refugees are locked in and there is lack of support for their safety and well-being. In Amsterdam the temporary residents of the old prison are not detained and there is some effort to help them feel at home, as far as possible. The "Bijlmer-bajes", a well-known prison in the Netherlands, was built in the 1970s with humanistic intentions. It used to have no bars, but toughened glass instead. It had relatively low fences and for a short while prisoners were not locked behind cell doors; they could freely walk in their (locked) ward and had a key to their cells. There were recreational activities and the main aim was to re-socialize prisoners. This idealistic emphasis quickly changed after two prisoners escaped in the early 1980s. Cutbacks in expenses furthermore led to a more sober regime, with fewer social workers, aligning with the rising neoliberal discourse since the 1980s. During these developments, the building changed as well. Metal structures were placed over the windows, fences were fortified with barbed wire and the next 30 years the building complex functioned as an ordinary prison. Last summer, the last "Bijlmer-bajes" prisoners were moved elsewhere. The building will be demolished, because the ground is expensive and marketable. For the coming few years, between prison and demolition in 2018, refugees will live in the prison complex, under scrutiny of the Dutch government institution responsible for reception, supervision and departure (in- or outside of the Netherlands) of asylum seekers (COA). On September 24<sup>th</sup> 2016 the refugee centre opened its doors to visitors, which offered a chance to see the combination between an old prison, refugees and artists. Approaching the building, I see the six modernist residential towers that are most characteristic of the "Bijlmer-bajes". The 14 storey bare grey towers have always offered a gloomy sight when commuting by train in the morning: such visible high rise buildings where criminals used to be locked away. When arriving in front of the building, I notice a glass door entrance and an open courtyard. Some of the walls have already been torn down and the lower part of the building is now painted in bright colours: geometric forms in green, yellow, orange and white. The artists who have created these murals (Dre Urhahn and Jeroen Koolhaas) are known for their work in Brazilian favelas. They currently "collaborate" with Amsterdam Municipality and COA in order to make these paintings with refugees. For the open day, the "favela painters" have put up a large canvas to paint together with visitors and residents of the refugee centre. There is a design made by the artists and several people fill in the pre-structured figures. The painting has a similar style as the mural, but this time there is also a stylistic human figure with a smiling face. On the courtyard I see picnic benches, a food stand and children who run around, or sit down and have their faces painted. Residents watch visitors arrive, visitors watch residents and some visitors and residents socialize. A sunny autumn day adds to a pleasant atmosphere, but I also sense a strange combination of refugee/prison tourism and well-intended wish for human contact with "the other". Added to that, there are professionals from (non-governmental) organizations who seek contact with refugees to set up new projects. Besides

[the Favela painting project](#), there is an NGO called the Refugee Company that aims to help to “speed up integration” by creative activities. They work with artists and craftspeople among the refugee population and anyone who wants to develop themselves in creative ways. I ask some of the residents what they think about the art projects. I meet a Syrian artist who recently moved to Amsterdam and who is educated in Canada. He is planning to work with a community and art project within the refugee center. In response to the colourful painting he says that he appreciates it, because it gives a pleasant atmosphere. Personally, he is more drawn to darker art and says that drawing more negative images should also be given space in art projects with refugees. He explains that, when coming from a war situation and leaving your country, there might be a process of mourning involved which can be expressed through art. Amer, from East Syria, says he likes that the courtyard is colourful, but he would not be involved in one of the art projects: “They are..” He puts his head up and touches his nose with his finger, gesturing they are somewhat high class, or hoity-toity to him. Another resident says that anything that distracts from negative thoughts and from the stress of the asylum process is helpful. Other ways to do so, to him, are to go running every morning. More important to Amer is that he has his own room and that it is not too crowded. He has moved nine times to different asylum centres in the Netherlands and in some places there had been fighting. He explains that the fighting was caused by overcrowding and because there were people from different cultures who did not mix well. He did not mind moving around to different camps in the Netherlands because he liked meeting people, but now he is happy to be in Amsterdam, where he has his own room and feels safe. When asked how he experiences being in a former prison, he assures me that they are not locked in. He can move freely outside of the building and he receives a small allowance. (He had to give up smoking to be able to make ends meet). He goes out to buy his own groceries and cooks his meal in a shared kitchen. He wants to show where his living space is, but a guard does not allow visitors to walk in that part of the building today. I make an appointment with Amer for an interview on another day. In another part of the building, I am allowed to see former prison cells that are refurnished, but not in use yet. The rooms are 10 square meters; there is a single bed, a simple chair, a small fridge, a window, a small TV screen and a small toilet. There are bars in front of the windows, but they do not appear very solid and prison-like. The room is sober and small. I imagine it to be “doable” for a short period of time, as long as you are not locked up and have a better place in sight. I do wonder how families live in the small cells. A guided tour in the building takes me to a kindergarten that is set up by a welfare organisation. A professional who works there explains that the kindergarten is available so children can safely play while parents can arrange their paper work, or go to Dutch lessons. There are small chairs and tables, toys, a table and chairs where parents can come together. The visitors are asked to make a welcome card for the children and/or for their parents, with colour pencils and stickers. Being in a peace-loving state of mind I draw a rainbow and peace sign and write “Welcome to Amsterdam” (in Dutch). Other visitors write similar messages. One woman writes: “Your journey has brought you to the Netherlands”, “Welcome to your new home”, and the words: “Freedom”, “Love”, “Learn new things”. She adds stickers of a schoolbag, a heart and a butterfly. When I arrive back in the main corridor, I see two women who are fiddling with colourful yarn who ask me to join in. The (white Dutch) women organize a weekly handcraft activity. While I braid a bracelet, one of the women explains that this is a good way to keep

your mind from negative thoughts and to socialise with other women. Three Syrian women join us and start making bracelets as well. They don't speak English or Dutch. One of the Dutch women offers her bracelet to one of them, which is accepted with a smile. A colourful braided chord is knotted around her wrist. After finishing my bracelet I continue to walk around. I hear music and by following my ears, I arrive in a large room where a group of men is jamming: I hear Arabic style singing; there is man behind a keyboard and I see another man playing a string instrument that is unfamiliar to me (an Oud, I find out later). I join in with a guitar that is available and add some simple chords to what they are playing. After playing, a man who organized the jam session asks me if I'm interested in giving guitar lessons for refugees. He says that they could benefit from having a woman around, because it would be easier to build trust with women and children who they also want to involve. The activities are every week in studio around the corner run by a small NGO. To me, this would be a good way to meet people to interview them for the "Bodies Across Borders" research project. How the stay in the "Bijlmer-bajes", the art, the memories of home, the journey and the first moments in the Netherlands are experienced on a more everyday basis is to be found out by further interviewing residents. Most likely, staying at the refugee centre is nothing like this open day, with its abundance of creativity and positive human contact. However, this day has shown that, as a first impression, some of the idealistic 1970s intentions of the "Bijlmer-bajes" are becoming manifest after all. Onderzoeksraad voor Veiligheid (2010). Brand cellencomplex Schiphol-Oost (Schiphol-East Detention Centre Fire). The Hague, September 2006.

[www.schipholwakes.nl/background-information-in-english.htm](http://www.schipholwakes.nl/background-information-in-english.htm)

[Documentary about the "Bijlmer-bajes" prison \(in Dutch\)](#)