

# WHOSE FUTURE IS HERE?

SEARCHING FOR  
HOSPITALITY IN BRUSSELS  
NORTHERN QUARTER





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ARCH (Action Research  
Collective for Hospitality)



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# THE CITIZEN'S PLATFORM'S SOLIDARITY NETWORK: MAPPING SERVICES FOR THE UNDOCUMENTED MIGRANTS OF MAXIMILIAN PARK

02-B

Vincent Alexis, Racha Daher,  
Marie Trossat

As the basic needs of the undocumented migrants residing in Maximilian Park in the Northern Quarter of Brussels go neglected due to their legal status, their embodied presence has forced alternative and urgent forms of action to extend support to them. For those undocumented migrants, this support is largely extended by the *Plateforme Citoyenne de Soutien aux Réfugiés* (Citizen's Platform), the main actor mobilizing services in the area by organizing and coordinating with citizens and other non-profit organizations. At the core of their work is the value of solidarity<sup>1</sup>. While other platforms that provide information on where to access services for those in precarious situations are available, and other organizations are at work in the area, the Citizen's Platform has dedicated itself to the service of this demographic, localizing most of its functions in the quarter within their vicinity.

During the course of ARCH's action, a close collaboration with the Citizen's Platform allowed ethnographic work to be performed directly with those undocumented residents of the park in the form of group talks, one-on-one conversations, and focus groups around certain questions. The work revealed they rely hugely on the Citizen's Platform to access both services or information about services they could

1 R. Daher and V.d'Auria(2018). "Enacting Citizenship in an Urban Borderland: The Case of Maximilian Park in Brussels", *European Journal of Creative Practices in Cities and Landscapes* 1, no.1, 53-7; R. Daher, V.d'Auria and K. Rohde (2018). "From Integration to Solidarity: Insights from Civil Society Organizations in Three European Cities", *Urban Planning* 3, no. 4, 79-90.



benefit from without fear for their safety<sup>2</sup>. But the spatial dimension of the support offered was not clear and a map that pointed out their network did not exist. During the research, an attempt to unfold the spatial dimension of this network took place, along with an attempt to understand what distinguishes the Citizen's Platform from other platforms. In this text, we describe the process that lead to mapping this network and its significance for those undocumented migrants in the Northern Quarter, the group that was focused on for this study.

## MANY MAPS, FEW PLACES

On a table at the Humanitarian Hub<sup>3</sup>, a hub with clustered services for the use of undocumented migrants, many flyers and maps made by various non-profit organizations lay scattered. They contain endless information about where to find certain services that undocumented migrants *may* be able to access. Some maps are translated, others are not; some refer solely to a specific district such as the one by *Centre Public d'Action Sociale* (Public Center for Social Action), better known as CPAS, de Saint-Gilles, while others point out public toilets and fountains. Few listed all services present for all people in deprived conditions and few extended the map's boundary to all of Brussels. For the undocumented migrants in question, navigating through them to find services they could access certainly poses a challenge.

On the back side of these maps, updated and reprinted every year, are the names of actors in the fight against homelessness and precariousness in Brussels' public spaces, such as Street Nurses, La Strada, CPAS, and *Dépannage d'Urgence de Nuit et Échanges* (known as DUNE, an abbreviation which translates to Emergency Night Help and Exchange). In parallel with the (little used) Refaid<sup>4</sup> application, another interactive, online application-based map was launched last April: "Survivinginbrussels"<sup>5</sup>. Initiated in 2015 by the non-profit organization DoucheFLUX, and supported by Brussels Smart City, the application aims to create a tool for everyone and that anyone could use. "There are too many printed maps and each organization publishes its own, which is problematic" says Valentine Reyniers, the mission head of

2 As they are undocumented, they have been subject to police-chasing and crackdown for detention and deportation.

3 The Humanitarian Hub is a space where the Citizen's Platform, in collaboration with the Belgian Red Cross, Doctors of the World (Médecins du Monde) and Doctors Without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières), cluster services for undocumented migrants. At the time of research, it was located in the Northern Station; it has since moved to an alternate nearby location.

4 Refaid is an online application that place services for migrants and refugees on a map in a very simple interface. Organizations who help them upload and update their information on the application. Its aim to map such services globally. For more information, see <https://refaid.com/>.

5 survivinginbrussels.be is a website and online application that helps people in precarious situations find information easily with a few clicks. They can find information such as where to eat, sleep, drink, and go to the toilet on the application. It lists all places on offer. For more information, see <https://survivinginbrussels.be/app/en/>.

Survivinginbrussels, who actively worked on compiling all the information in one interactive online map. According to her, most organizations do not orient themselves toward the service of undocumented migrants but are rather open to them or are moving towards this openness<sup>6</sup>.

The map was launched in March 2019 and is currently being translated to 10 languages. Survivinginbrussels, by bringing together all services and publics, aims to avoid differentiating and contrasting undocumented migrants from other precarious and homeless people, because “reducing the person to status” is not desirable, and associations all work for the same cause.<sup>7</sup> But this map, which is intended to be for everyone meets a *contrario*: the limit of addressing a non-specific public. Places open to undocumented migrants, the specific request of the Citizen’s Platform, do not want to confront their public with a systematic refusal based on their undocumented status.

The Citizen’s Platform alluded to the desire to have its own map and in which several wishes would be expressed: reporting on the geography of locations they run for the service of undocumented migrants (Maximilian Park, Humanitarian Hub, and Porte d’Ulysse); listing locations and other services accessible to undocumented migrants run by other organizations; and making their network of partners visible. The elaboration of this map raised a number of questions related to the Citizen’s Platform’s view of other actors and their capacity to be hospitable or not. The very limited list of places willing to host the undocumented contradicted the endless list of maps made available at the table of the Humanitarian Hub.

We took on the task of creating this map for the Citizen’s Platform, for the service of undocumented migrants. However, for us as researchers in a process of mapping, many questions developed around what it would include. For example, would the map include all shelters around the city open to all homeless people? How would this distinguish itself from the work of Survivinginbrussels? How would the map we produce specifically benefit the work of the Citizen’s Platform and the undocumented migrants they serve? By visiting day-time shelters, most of which are labeled “low threshold”<sup>8</sup>, the aim was to compare the principles of openness, accessibility and reception that the label suggests with the criteria of hospitality. Many questions came up: what services are offered? How are these spaces connected to the city? Are they visible? What are the conditions of access: a membership card, a status, a schedule? What languages are spoken there? The questions went on.

We made a list of reception facilities and services in the city and went on to visit numerous ones. We found that it is possible to find places to rest, eat, and drink, change, take a shower, and do laundry, as well

6 Interview by Marie Trossat with Valentine Reyniers in March 2019.

7 Loc. Cit.

8 “Low threshold” organizations are structures whose role and philosophy includes opening up to non-specific public: precarious and homeless, men, women, children of all ages, with or without papers.

as to store belongings and get a haircut; but those places were constrained by displacement and insecurity, or the lack of affordability. It is possible to access if you can move around on foot, if you are encouraged or even invited, if you are protected by legal status. It is also possible if you know these places, if you were given directions, and if you are at ease navigating the city to find them. It is possible if there is space available, but there is hardly ever enough space. Yes, it is 'possible' but so often 'on condition'.

While visiting these places, we realized that the many maps distributed at the Humanitarian Hub open up few effective places to welcome undocumented migrants. The process, therefore revealed the difficult reality of urban hostility in Brussels. We were convinced of the need to create a new map and to clearly inform undocumented migrants of the places that *surely* welcome them.

## SOLIDARY NETWORK, LOCAL ACTION

Underlying the Citizen's Platform's desire to create a map specifically for undocumented migrants, are two strongly-held values: including an excluded group of people within the city and building a network of solidarity to empower them. By setting up their main activities in the vicinity of Maximilian Park, a highly visible and accessible location where undocumented migrants are practically living, the Citizen's Platform has managed to reach out to them and create a personal relationship with them. From fieldwork and ethnographic work performed in the course of ARCH's research, we observed that their aid workers work closely and regularly with the residents of the park and are well-known to them. Sensitive not just to their needs, but also to their morale and state of mind, the workers have instilled a deep sense of trust by the residents who have come to rely on them hugely as their main source to access a service, facilitate it, or provide reliable information on where to find it, safely.

Simultaneously acting locally in the Northern Quarter, the Citizen's Platform continues to build a Brussels-wide network of support with other groups and organizations, based on values of solidarity and humanitarianism, to facilitate services to undocumented migrants. The spatial constellation of the few places that currently and surely welcomes undocumented migrants and its collective geographical impact on the Brussels region were still unclear. In an effort to understand the spatial dimension of this network of support, recommended by the Citizen's Platform to the undocumented migrants residing in Maximilian Park, an effort to compile their locations was carried out. In addition to the main sites run by the Citizen's Platform, the facilities mapped include shelters, urgent and non-urgent health care, and legal advice, as well as food and clothes distribution, phone charging, and showers amongst others. Additionally, the map included main public transit stops by which to reach the services in the most straight-forward manner. Mapping them on the Brussels' plan resulted in the illustration shown below (Fig.1). Finally, we also saw the need to address

citizens who play a huge role in the Citizen's Platform's network, by offering sleeping space to Maximilian Park's residents through the 'hébergement' (accommodation) strategy organized online<sup>9</sup>. This strategy is one of the core activities of the Citizen's Platform. However, this is where the map reached its limits, as mapping private homes was neither ethical nor feasible, and hence it was not part of the scope of this research nor its intent. Alternatively, to address them, we compiled locations around the city where donations could be dropped-off.

The aforementioned ethnographic work revealed that, for residents of the park, mobility around the city to access a service, posed challenges to their safety due to police cracking down on their presence, albeit undocumented. This makes their navigation around the city limited to certain stops and locations to and from which they feel secure. They expressed that their most used route, for example, is via tram line 55 from the North Station to Porte d'Ulysse, the night shelter run and managed by the Citizen's Platform.

Looking closely at the map shows that services cluster on a north-south axis between North and South Stations through the center of the city; they further extend north-east and south-east. However, with the exception of two drop-off locations for citizens to donate their items, no services for undocumented migrants are currently present in the western part of Brussels, which falls in Brussels' 'croissant pauvre'<sup>10</sup>, an area that has been monitored for decades to have the least advantaged populations composed of people with migrant backgrounds. It is unclear, however, whether the lack of services facilitated by the Citizen's Platform in these "arrival" neighborhoods<sup>11</sup> is a result of a lack of outreach from its part to organizations in the area, or whether support networks are locally embedded and not accessible to our research.

From the close encounter with both undocumented migrants and aid workers of the Citizen's Platform, as well as from fieldwork on site, the unique status of the Citizen's Platform's became rather clear. Its daily local presence and personal relationship with undocumented migrants in Maximilian Park and the Northern Quarter distinguishes it from other aid sources with large datasets to access information about services such as Refaid, or Survivinginbrussels. While these platforms are a great source of information to find aid for those in a deprived state, their main purpose is to provide information, making locations for assistance known. On the other hand, the Citizen's Platform's main purpose is "TO BUILD CONCRETE SOLIDARITY WITH ALL MIGRANTS"<sup>12</sup>, going beyond the notion of supplying information and extending humanitarian aid, but rather working directly with them

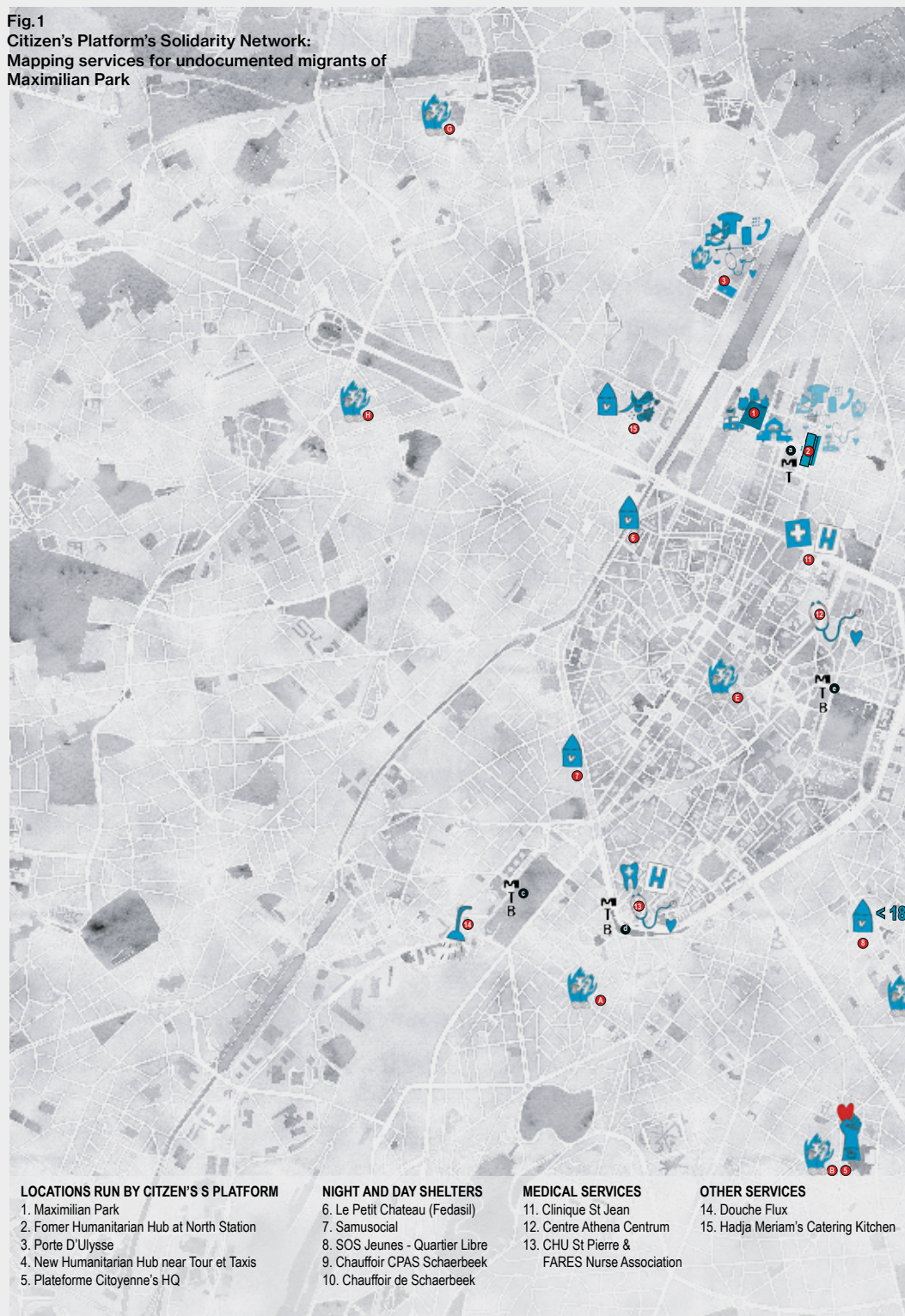
9 This online organization has been discussed by one of the authors in other articles. See Daher and d'Auria (2018), op. cit.

10 For the complete definition of Brussels' *Croissant Pauvre*, see: <https://monitoringdesquartiers.brussels/glossaire/>

11 D. Saunders (2012). *Arrival City: How the Largest Migration in History Is Reshaping Our World*, Vintage Books, New York.

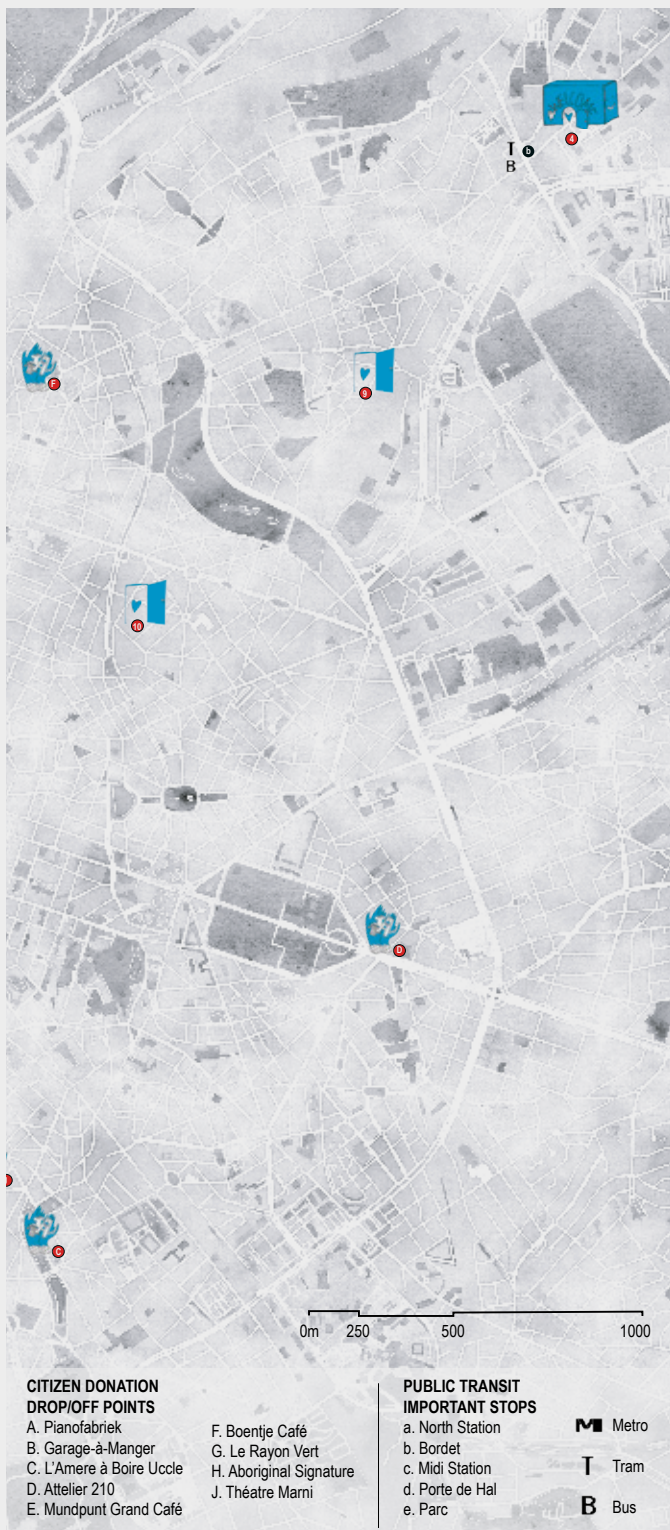
12 As stated on the website of the Citizen's Platform, see: <https://www.bxl-refugees.be/en/qui-sommes-nous/>

**Fig.1**  
**Citizen's Platform's Solidarity Network:**  
**Mapping services for undocumented migrants of**  
**Maximilian Park**



Information Source: Plateforme Citoyenne de Soutien aux Réfugiés | Drawing Credits: Drawings by ARCH members Rachia Daher, Marie Trossat, and Vincent Alexis, Icons extracted from illustrations by Elise Neirnick from documents of Plateforme Citoyenne de Soutien aux Réfugiés, June 2019.





## LOCATIONS RUN BY PLATEFORME CITOYENNE



Maximilian Park



Former Humanitarian Hub at North Station



New Humanitarian Hub near Tour et Taxis



Porte d'Ulysse Night Shelter



Plateforme Citoyenne's HQ

## SHELTERS



Night Shelter



Night Shelter for Minors



Day Shelter

## MEDICAL SERVICES



Medical and Psychological Care



Medical Emergencies



Dental Emergencies

## OTHER SERVICES



Legal Services



Catering Kitchen



Food Distribution



Wifi, Phone Charging & Phone Calls



Showers



Clothing Distribution

## FOR INVOLVED CITIZENS



Dispatch for Citizen Hosting



Donations Drop-off

and building solid relationships; “all” in their slogan goes to assert, ‘yes, even those undocumented’. Hence, their physical presence in the site-specific locality of Maximilian Park becomes very strategic for their action.

## DISCUSSION / REFLECTION

In reflecting on the mapping process, certainly there are limits to what the map created shows, and perhaps it is a partial statement about the extent of reception assistance in Brussels from the perspective of the Citizen's Platform. However, by focusing the study and effort on the context of the Northern Quarter and on the Citizen's Platform's network of support, we are able to better engage with the day-to-day issues and struggles of undocumented migrants, through focused ethnographic work. A concentrated specific case is an effective way to form detailed understanding of the issues tied to the condition, yet in a more engaged way that further helps represent specific information. Perhaps it does not tell the whole story, but it tells an important piece of it which can be used to critically interpret the issues at hand.

Moreover, the act of mapping has an agency in bringing to light issues that are otherwise under-represented to have an effect of change.<sup>13</sup> In this case it reveals that the solidary network has a spatial dimension. Simultaneously using an on the ground approach of research through ethnographic work and direct engagement with the Citizens' Platform and undocumented migrants, and using a top-down spatial mapping tool to document facilities they access, puts the service of those undocumented on the map. This documentation makes visible migrants' embodied presence despite their invisible position in the eyes of the state. While their status is not approved at the institutional level, their presence is tangible and supported by a solidary network that is not only localized in the Northern Quarter, but that extends to the Brussels region. Going beyond the illustrated map, the network further extends throughout the Belgian territory through the accommodation strategy the Citizen's Platform facilitates online, where citizens offer up sleeping space in their homes, hosting undocumented migrants from the park during the night. While this is a core mission of the Citizen's Platform, representing individual accommodation spaces reaches the limit of the mapping exercise due to its shifting and dynamic nature, as well as its status at the border of what is legal<sup>14</sup>. If it were possible to put this on the map, the hospitality dimension for undocumented migrants by citizens in the Citizen's Platform would appear all the more significant. While this type of mapping is, in theory, possible using sophisticated computer-generated

13 J. Corner (1999). “The Agency of Mapping,” in D. Cosgrove (ed.), (1999). *Mappings*, Reaktion Books, London.

14 There have been efforts by certain political parties in Belgium to allow police appearances in private homes to crack down on undocumented migrants and those that accommodate them, but such efforts were rejected.

scripts that could geo-locate where Facebook posts are coming from and translate them into a dot pattern that shows spatial distribution on a map<sup>15</sup>, this option extended beyond the scope of this endeavor.

As for the undocumented migrants under study, their attachment to the city is tied to their attachment to *place*, which is further tied to their sense of safety and security: they feel *relatively* safe, altogether, in Maximilian Park, in the Northern Quarter. In the event of a police raid, they are out in familiar public space, and they know their way around. This attachment engrains their stay in the area. Moreover, some of the most important and dynamic services in the solidarity network we are observing today, like Douche Flux and Belgium Kitchen, use adapted spaces or mobile structures linked to open public space with large reception capacity. Thus, the ability to be mobile and in public space become important criteria in the geography of hospitality in a climate of insecurity and control. The Citizen's Platform further has a very dynamic and malleable existence, with shifting spaces for their action (such as the Humanitarian Hub) and a strong online presence, that has been adapting and growing since it emerged in 2015. Importantly, what such dynamic methods-for-action reveal is a different and novel interpretation of reception spaces. By setting up near Maximilian Park, and a major transit station, and deploying means of hospitality in public spaces with large reception capacities, they offer much-needed services effectively, efficiently, and affordably making their impact wider-felt by the demographic in need. Finally, with its sophisticated dynamic processes and solidarity network, it strategically makes its work known and its presence in the city visible, engaging in political discourse aimed at broadening and stabilizing the reception of undocumented migrants.

15 A. Chua and A. Van de Moere (2017). "BinSq: Visualizing Geographic Dot Density Patterns with Gridded Maps", *Cartography and Geographic Information Science* 44, no. 5, 390–409.



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