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Citation for the published version (APA 6th)

Hauge, Å. L., Støa, E., & Denizou, K. (2017). Framing Outsidedness – Aspects of Housing Quality in Decentralized Reception Centres for Asylum Seekers in Norway. *Housing, Theory and Society*, 34(1), 1-20. doi:10.1080/14036096.2016.1200668

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# **Framing Outsidedness – Aspects of Housing Quality in Decentralized Reception Centres for Asylum Seekers in Norway**

## **Funding**

The article is based on research funded by the Norwegian Research Council under grant [number 213091/F10] and the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI).

## **Disclosure statement**

The authors have no financial interests in the study and are not aware of any conflicting interest in relation to the study.

**ABSTRACT:** *In 2013, more than seventy percent of Norwegian reception centres for asylum seekers were decentralized or partly decentralized, meaning that the residents lived in ordinary homes dispersed around the town or local area, instead of in a centralized institution. The paper presents results from a research project aiming to document and identify how localization, type of buildings and housing quality of asylum centres influence the asylum seekers' well-being. The main focus of the paper is on decentralized asylum centres. The results are based on qualitative case studies of seven selected centres. The housing standard in the case studies varied, but there was generally a lack of maintenance of the buildings. Even if decentralized accommodation was seen as improving the well-being of the residents, empowering them, making them more independent and reducing conflicts, there is a danger that poor housing quality turns it into a symbol of outsideness.*

**KEY WORDS:** Housing quality, Asylum seekers, Reception centres, Norway, Integration

## **Introduction**

Asylum seekers arriving in Norway are accommodated in reception centres. First they stay for a limited time in transit centres while their asylum interview is carried out and their application for asylum submitted. After that, they are moved to an ordinary centre where they stay for a longer period while waiting for their application to be considered<sup>1</sup>. The accommodation is organised as decentralized, partly decentralized or centralized centres. The fully centralized centres have an office for the staff and all accommodation located on campus in one or several buildings. These buildings are often former health institutions, hotels or military bases which for various reasons are no longer in use. A decentralized reception centre offers a main office with staff, where asylum-seekers can ask for assistance and information, while they live in ordinary homes elsewhere in the community. The partly decentralized centres include accommodation in one or more buildings on a campus which also holds the staff office, but the centre rents supplementary housing locally. In 2013, three out of four Norwegian centres were decentralized, among these, 32 percent of all centres were fully decentralized and 42 percent were partly decentralized (Strumse et al forthcoming 2016).

While there were approximately 14,500 asylum seekers in Norwegian reception centres in December 2014, the number has by the end of November 2015 risen to more than 31,000 (Norwegian Directorate of Immigration 2015a)<sup>2</sup>, and is at the time of writing (December 2015) believed to reach 100,000 within the coming years<sup>3</sup>. The largest groups come from Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Syria and Afghanistan. The residents at the centres are in different phases regarding the process of achieving permanent residence in Norway. Some are waiting for a reply of their application of residency in Norway. Others have received a negative reply and are destined to leave the country, or they have acquired a positive answer to their application, but still live at the centre while waiting to be settled in a Norwegian municipality. In September 2015 it was estimated that three out of four asylum seekers will be granted residency in Norway<sup>4</sup>.

Housing conditions for asylum seekers is challenging, and the quality is varied. Even if the need for more long-term solutions have been stressed during the huge influx of refugees in Europe during the autumn 2015, asylum seekers are often provided with "left over buildings" where nobody else wants to live. The housing quality is basic, maintenance is generally not prioritised, and the asylum seekers often have very little private space. The

standard and quality of the accommodation provided in a reception centre is based on the premise of a relatively short stay. Still, in 2014 it was estimated that one in four residents lived in a centre for more than 3 years<sup>5</sup>. Today, one year later, the stay at the centres is very likely to be prolonged further due to the high number of new applicants.

This article presents results from a research project aiming to document and identify how location, type of buildings and housing standard in asylum centres influence the asylum seekers' well-being<sup>6</sup>. It focuses on implications of the fact that a majority of centres offers decentralized housing, and will look into how this model affects the residents' well-being and the integration processes. The article will in particular discuss how the standard of the accommodation in decentralized centres influences and shapes understandings of asylum seekers, both how they regard themselves and how others see them. In accordance with Dovey ([1999] 2008, 1) we regard built form as something that "constructs and frames meanings". Meanings may be related both to identities and to power relations, and are continuously reframed due to changing practices. Before presenting more thoroughly important concepts and theoretical considerations related to the effects of physical environment and housing on well-being and inclusion, we will briefly outline aspects of the Norwegian asylum policy in order to clarify the context.

## **Background**

### *Norwegian Asylum policy*

In the requirement specification for the operation regulations of asylum centres in Norway, the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) determines that "governmental reception centres should be a simple but reasonable housing offer, securing the residents' needs and the individuals' need for safety"(Norwegian Directorate of Immigration [2008] 2015). A problem is that "simple but reasonable"<sup>7</sup> is not defined. Previous research has documented connections between the localization of the centres, outdoor areas, and the asylum seekers' mental health, social life, and interaction with the local community. Decentralization of housing units for asylum seekers has been shown to improve contact with the local community and may in turn contribute to their integration and a better life situation (e.g. Berg et al 2005; Drangslund and Fuglseth 2009; S holt and Holm 2010). Young, single asylum seekers and children, depend particularly on the physical environment for play and development (Seeberg 2009; Seland and Liden 2011; Berg and Tronstad 2015). Also, the well-being and security of women at asylum centres is affected by the plan layout and accessible private space (Skog y 2008).

The aims for services for asylum seekers in Norway are according to the Official Norwegian Report delivered by a select committee appointed by the government, the so-called Berge-committee<sup>8</sup> (Official Norwegian Report 2011, 10), as follows:

1. Facilitate quick settlement, integration and inclusion if the application is successful
2. Motivate and facilitate return and re-integration in home-country if application is not successful
3. Cost-efficiency
4. Secure individual dignity and functional ability

The aims are in many ways incompatible. It is hard to facilitate integration and return simultaneously. Cost efficiency may further be a hindrance to securing individual dignity and functional ability. However, the housing conditions may be used actively to reach these aims, through a focus on how the environment may contribute to well-being.

The economic and legal framework that the authorities provide for the establishment of asylum centres influence the housing quality of the centres. In Norway, contracts on reception centre operation are open to competition, and UDI makes agreements with municipalities, voluntary organizations or private actors (Larsen, 2014). Short-term rental contracts for actors in this market and the risk of losing a contract with three months' notice often lead to short term solutions. Also, limited economic resources, varying numbers of asylum seekers entering Norway each year, and the changes in policy due to new governments, make long term planning and operation of asylum centres difficult.

#### *Decentralized Reception Centres – Main Characteristics*

We have seen an increasing share of decentralized housing for asylum seekers in Norway. This follows a general tendency that institutions for different categories of vulnerable groups have been closing down, and decentralized units are regarded as providing better life quality for those in need of assistance. Since the 1990s it has been an established goal of Norwegian welfare policy to let people in need of special care live at home and receive the services there. This seems to have affected the way accommodation for asylum seekers is organised. For this group decentralized solutions are not only justified by the assumption that such centres give better living conditions for the residents, but also by the fact that they are more flexible to operate.

The decentralized centres rent available, ordinary accommodation in flats and low rise housing in the local community. Especially in the cities, small flats are available in the rental market for asylum seekers. Such flats are regarded as suitable for this purpose because many asylum seekers want to live in an urban setting. Other municipalities do not have sufficient available flats for this purpose. In more rural areas, detached housing is therefore used to a large extent. The homes used by asylum seekers are basically similar to the housing in the neighbourhood as shown in figures 1 a-c. However, because of limited budgets, the centres are only able to rent the cheapest accommodation available. This implies that the buildings used by asylum seekers are often marked by a lower aesthetical and technical standard than their neighbours.

<Figures 1a-c>

### **The Effects of Physical Environment and Housing on Well-being and Inclusion**

Housing research has, for many years, focused on how housing quality and well-functioning neighbourhoods improve the health and everyday life of individuals (e.g. Lawrence 1987, 2002; Halpern 1995). A broader understanding of the meaning of housing and home has arisen particularly during the last decades, with increased emphasis on qualitative research and the close interwoven meaning of physical environments and social processes (Clapham 2005). Lee (2003, 33) states that

.. the built environment is more or less isomorphic with the social system that is developed within it. Also because no human environment of any consequence can be perceived as a physical object in isolation from its social implications and behavioral activity patterns

In the following sections we will briefly present some theoretical perspectives on the relationship between housing, well-being and processes of inclusion or exclusion.

### *Housing and Well-being*

Housing influences people's well-being, identity and mental health in at least two ways. Firstly through how the physical environment facilitates different types of behaviour, daily activities, and social interaction. The connections between behaviour and environment are dependent on situation and contextual variables. Secondly through the associations that physical environments and neighbourhoods give. These associations are created through social interaction and influenced by context, process and situation (Hauge 2009).

Within environmental psychology, a large body of research has been accumulated on various aspects of residential meaning and satisfaction as well as on the conditions for a residence to become a home. For example, residential preferences are affected by both personal and architectural factors (Paulus, Nagar & Camacho 1991; Widmar 1984). Further, residential satisfaction is broadly speaking a function of the resident's relation to the residence and the resident's comparison between present and past residence, present and ideal residence and between perceived and preferred qualities (Canter 1983). Although distress is a normal response to inadequate housing, it may have even more serious consequences when residents are unable to improve their residential situation. Inadequate housing, for example overcrowding, may be related to psychological distress and psychiatric illness, long-term negative effects on children's development, and disruption of parent-child relations (e.g. Taylor, Repetti and Seeman 1997; Evans, Lepore, Shejwal and Palsane 1998; Evans, Wells and Moch 2003). Also, features of the physical environment affecting privacy regulation (Altman 1975; Archea 1977; Margulis 2003), the experience of overcrowding in shared physical space (Evans and Saegert 2000) and person-environment compatibility (e.g. Kaplan 1995) both indoors and outdoors, have all been found to be important in supporting or limiting the well-being of residents.

Perceived housing quality differs over time as expectations change. These expectations may be culturally specific, or may vary with class, age, gender and lifestyle. Some aspects of housing quality are possible to quantify, others are not. Housing quality has aesthetic and symbolic implications that are impossible to quantify, but is nevertheless of great importance for security, control, and a feeling of being at home. Hauge and Støa's (2009) study of how a group of former criminals and drug abusers were influenced by architectural quality is an example of research on how such qualities can be used as a strategy to improve life and future hopes for a vulnerable group of residents. The study shows how former homeless people interpret different architectural details as symbols of how "normal" people live, their self-worth and possibilities to get their lives on track.

Although a considerable amount of research has been carried out during the last decades on conditions in reception centres (Valenta and Berg 2010), little deals with the physical qualities of the accommodation and the role this may play for the well-being for the asylum seekers. There are however some exceptions. One of these is a study on a Dutch centralized reception centre which shows how residents evaluated their current living situation in relation to ideas of home (van der Horst 2004). The informants identified what they lacked and missed in terms of meanings of home. Two of the factors considered most important were the lack of autonomy and the possibility to uphold certain cultural traditions. The lack of autonomy emerged as a main "unhomely" feature of the reception centre. Guests had to leave at certain times in the evening, there were house rules prohibiting loud music in the evenings, and the cleaning duties were controlled by the staff. Generally, what was conceived as "child-like treatment" and the control exercised by the employees of the institution was seen as "unhomely". The difficulties of upholding certain cultural traditions appeared as another "unhomely" factor. This was related even more directly to the physical features of the centre and concerned both the lack of separate rooms for men and women and difficulties in maintaining traditions such as receiving guests, and secure appropriate relations between

family members. Ideas about the relations between family and home were disturbed due to the lack of space. Being in control of both what and when to eat was central to the asylum-seekers' sense of well-being. The study highlights how asylum-seekers struggle with negotiations of what is homely and unhomely, as well as possibilities for engaging in homemaking practices within the physical and social structures of a centralized reception centre.

### *Housing – Framing Inclusion or Exclusion*

Foucault (1974) argued how buildings that are institutionalised and constructed for one purpose, can be altered and given new meanings and effects. From such a perspective, asylum reception centres make an interesting case for considering the role of place and buildings in social processes, as the centres almost without exception use buildings meant for other purposes than housing asylum seekers. In his book on how the built environment mediates power, Dovey ([1998] 2009, 208) claims that while

.. the built environment does not inherently oppress or liberate.. [...] Oppression and liberation are forms of social practice which are mediated by built form. These practices 'take place': they frame and are framed by certain spatial structures and provinces of meaning.

Among the dimensions along which the dialectics of power in places are played out, and which may be particularly relevant for the discussion about asylum centres, he mentions those of segregation /access and identity/difference (18). While the first one is about how boundaries and pathways may segregate places by social status, the second dimension concerns how "Buildings and places inevitably construct and symbolize socially constructed identities and differences" (Dovey ([1998] 2009, 18).

Again, little research has looked specifically on how the architecture and housing qualities in asylum centres affect integration processes. However, here there are some exceptions. Phillips (2006) studied housing as a tool for integration of asylum seekers and refugees in Britain. She found that new migrants experience housing deprivation and insecurity. One of her interviewees among community development workers characterises the resident group (both asylum-seekers and refugees) like this: "They are outsiders in areas where people already feel left out." (543) Despite good intentions from the government about the importance of decent, safe, secure and affordable housing, she found many obstacles to refugee housing integration: Gaps in provision, choice and support. Fozdar and Hartley (2014) also see housing as vital for successful settlement of refugees in an Australian context. They state that establishing a home is part of redeveloping a sense of ontological security. They found that positive home-building experiences are characterized by remaking home as a place of connection with others, personal pride, comfort and leisure, family and commensality. However, refugees in Australia experience similar challenges as in Britain, with lack of affordable public housing, and poor quality such as leaking taps, insect-infested rooms, lack of response on maintenance by estate agents. They experience insecurity of tenure, lack of appropriate housing, discrimination and legal issues. This resulted in a sense of alienation and insecurity for many of them (Fozdar and Hartley 2014).

### *Between Well-being and Inclusion*

In a human right perspective, we would argue that all people have similar rights for well-being irrespective of their status as asylum seekers, immigrants or permanent residents in Norway. As long as people have the right to stay in Norway as asylum seekers, they should, according to this perspective, be treated as any other residents. This implies that the

Norwegian immigration authorities are responsible for the well-being of asylum seekers. The quality of the accommodation offered to them should be in line with this responsibility.

There are also at least two other reasons why the question of how housing conditions may affect the well-being of asylum seekers in particular. Firstly, asylum seekers are at risk of developing psychological problems (Berg and Sveaass 2005; Brekke, Sveaass and Vevstad 2010). As mentioned above, it is well documented that the physical environment, e.g. when it comes to overcrowding and lack of private space, may increase this risk. Research conducted on other vulnerable residential groups shows that housing quality may be used as a strategy to promote the mental health of the residents, as well as their activity level and well-being (Hauge 2009). Secondly, acknowledging the fact that a majority of asylum seekers will receive permanent permission to stay in Norway (Norwegian Directorate of Immigration 2015b), it is vital that the housing conditions (including location, architectural and technical standard) support a positive integration process.

While well-being is an increasingly utilised concept, it has no clear-cut definition. According to World Health Organisation (WHO) the concept is closely related to mental health: “Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community” (WHO 2014). Considering research on housing qualities Ryff’s (1989) operationalization seems fruitful as she relates it to theories of positive psychological functioning along six dimensions: 1) self acceptance, 2) positive relation to other people, 3) autonomy, 4) managing of the environment, 5) life-meaning, and 6) personal growth. It could be assumed that all these dimensions are just as relevant for asylum seekers as for other groups, in spite of the extraordinariness of their situation, but not all are affected by housing conditions and housing quality. The most relevant and the ones that may be directly or indirectly affected by the housing situation are the first four: Self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy and environmental mastery. We will argue that they not only affect asylum seekers’ well-being, but are also strongly connected to positive integration processes.

## **Method**

This paper is based on qualitative case studies of seven selected centres, but supplemented with findings from a quantitative survey to employees at all asylum centres in Norway<sup>9</sup>. In addition to the case studies, representatives from immigration authorities, operating agencies and municipalities were interviewed. The findings were also discussed in an advisory group with representatives from UDI, operators of reception centres, former asylum seekers and residents at reception centres, and NGOs working for asylum seekers' rights. The results are reported in detail in Hauge, Denizou and Støa (2015) and Strumse, Grønseth and Støa (forthcoming 2016).

### *Case Studies of Seven Asylum Centres in Norway*

Case studies are the preferred strategy when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context. A case study relies on multiple sources of evidence, often with a mix between quantitative and qualitative methods (Yin 2003). The results from any case study can be analytically generalised, meaning that the findings from one study can be used as a guide to what might occur in other situations (Kvale 1996). By providing detailed information about context, specifying supporting evidence, and making arguments explicit, the researcher allows readers to judge the soundness of the generalisation. This generates concrete, practical context-dependent knowledge. The case studies focused on face-to-face encounters (Grønseth



and Davis 2010) and interviews conducted according to an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) (Smith and Osborn 2004). According to Smith and Osborn (2004, 51), this approach attempts to:

.. explore personal experience and is concerned with an individual's personal perception or account of an object or event. The researcher has an active role in the process. The participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their world.

In other words, IPA allows the researchers to interpret the results according to their understanding of the context, in contrast to traditional phenomenology that focuses on the informants' understanding of a phenomenon. In this study, IPA makes it possible to interpret the findings in light of the overall poor housing standard in the asylum centre sector. This situation is visible to researchers who are able to compare it with research from other housing sectors, while informants working or living in the asylum centre sector may be used to the standard. Interpreting meanings of housing quality is impossible without understanding the life world of the informants.

The main source of data for this article is interviews with employees and leaders at the asylum centres and other actors within the field, complemented by shorter resident interviews, and on-site inspections. Seven case studies are conducted, including one transit reception centre, and six ordinary centres of which some have departments for single minors or reinforced departments (see table 1). In addition, five centres were visited by groups of architecture students. These visits included registrations of built environment and brief interviews with staff and residents. The case studies were selected with the aim of variation in localisation, geography and organisation (centralized or decentralized). The cases will not be presented in detail, in order to secure anonymity.

<Table 1>

The focus on the employees' experience with the reception centres gives different types of results than a focus on a residential perspective would give. The advantage is the employees' meta perspective, having a distance to the stressful and insecure situation of being an asylum seeker. On the other hand, their statements may be biased due to their role as representatives of the centre management and they might de-emphasize critical aspects because of a tendency to identify with or even support the choices of their workplace. The views of long-term employees may further be affected by expectations of a certain standard and as mentioned, even a tendency to get used to and thus to somehow accept a poor standard. Therefore, asylum seekers themselves would probably have other perspectives on the housing situation in asylum centres than the ones that are accounted for in this article. Consequently, other parts of this research have covered field-visits emphasising observations, face-to-face encounters and in-depth narrative interviews with asylum seekers. These field-visits are a part of an ongoing PhD project<sup>10</sup> and will be presented in future publications.

Questions addressed in the case studies were: In what ways do housing quality, localization, and outdoor environments influence asylum seekers' well-being, mental health, conflict level and the relationship between asylum seekers and the local community? Which aspects in relation to the physical environments and social space are important for strengthening a positive development of the social life at asylum centres? Which qualities relating to housing, localisation or outdoor areas, may be important for different demographic groups of asylum seekers? The analysis is based on narratives on the meaning of the housing conditions for asylum seekers, retrieved from the semi-structured interviews. The data were coded and grouped according to topics that emerged in the material (Smith and Osborn 2004).

Important topics that emerged are represented in the sub-headings in the following sections. Our intention is however, not to present the whole scope of the study but to focus on findings related to decentralized accommodation. We will first look at what was regarded as the favourable aspects of decentralized reception centres, and then turn to discuss some more questionable sides related to the standard of buildings used.

## **Favourable Aspects of Decentralized Centres**

As already mentioned, three out of four reception centres were fully or partly decentralized at the time of this research, meaning that many residents lived in ordinary flats and detached houses in the town or local area (Strumse, Grønseth and Støa forthcoming 2016). This situation brings up interesting issues related to both individual well-being and to the relationship between asylum seekers and the local community. In order to discuss the implications of offering decentralized accommodation to a larger share of the asylum seekers, we will first discuss the two briefly in relation to each other and then turn to issues related to the well-being of the asylum seekers and their relationship to the local community.

### *Centralized versus decentralized centres?*

Although the respondents were relatively clear in their preference of decentralized centres, it also became evident that more centralized solutions also have advantages: The employees in centralized reception centres stated that they have a better opportunity than in decentralized centres to prevent isolation and loneliness among the residents. They can pay more attention to asylum seekers who may need special care. This is especially important for single minors and asylum seekers with mental problems. Our informants emphasize that it is therefore important to keep some centralized and institutional reception centres for groups of residents that need to be followed up more closely. Some also underline the importance of information, especially in the beginning of their stay, and believe that this is easier to accomplish in a centralized centre: “In centralized reception centres, the distribution of information is easier. It is easier to collect the residents for information meetings” (employee).

There seems to be an agreement among most respondents that a combination is best: “.. the most ideal solution is a combination of a centralized reception centre and decentralized housing units” (employee). One of the employees say that a dream model of a reception centre would be partly decentralized, where the asylum seekers moved to a decentralized housing unit when they had got enough information to manage living in Norway.

Most informants, however, emphasised the *benefits* of decentralized accommodation. This goes both for the management of the centre and for the residential well-being. Advantages for residents are related to empowerment, reduced conflict level and integration. However, we also find that the same advantages may be threatened by issues such as unsuitable dwelling types, and low housing standard. These issues will be discussed in the following sections.

### *Empowerment*

Decentralized housing is regarded by our informants as an instrument to empower the residents. They have experienced that living in “ordinary” homes in “ordinary” neighbourhoods makes the asylum seekers more independent than in an institutionalised centre. According to one of the employees:

Decentralized housing strengthens the ability to live in a normal home and the asylum seekers become more independent. In centralized reception centres, where the

employees are available all the time, the residents ask for help with everything. When they live decentralized, the threshold to ask for help is higher (for example health services). This makes them more independent. The employees come to them, instead of the asylum seekers coming to us. To live this way is a good change in life for them. It makes them think more about what to do in society, and they become more active users of school, library, voluntary organisations, training, cafés etc

As asylum seekers are given responsibility, they will more actively seek to create a life for themselves while waiting, and thus become empowered through taking charge of their own life. They further improve their capabilities for living in the Norwegian society. Søholt and Holm (2010) found the same in a recent study of decentralized asylum centres. The asylum seekers have to use facilities in the local community more actively to get what they need, and this in turn leads to a more active life. Empowerment and independence are concepts used by the interviewees, and these concepts relate closely to two of Ryff's dimensions of well-being: Autonomy and environmental mastery (Ryff 1989). She explains autonomy as self-determination, independence and regulation of behaviour from within. Environmental mastery is about the ability to manipulate and control the environment. . The concept of empowerment is in the literature closely linked to the field of community psychology (Perkins and Zimmerman 1995) where it is defined according to Rappoport, (1987: 121) as "both individual determination over one's own life and democratic participation in the life of one's community". The employees in our case studies strongly encourage a view of the asylum seekers as active participants in society, and claim that institutions – understood as centralized reception centres – make them passive. The positive effect decentralized housing may have for the well-being of asylum seekers is supported by information given in interviews about the residents being eager to move to self-contained housing when it becomes available. The living units outside the centre are popular both among families and singles, and there are waiting lists.

It is not obvious that being left to one's own in decentralised housing units, gives empowerment in the sense the concept is understood within community psychology, since residents seldom have the opportunity to control neither the type of housing nor the level of assistance. It could therefore be questioned whether the employees use the term empowerment in this context as a way to diminish potential negative consequences from accommodating asylum seekers in decentralised housing units. Although this may be a part of the picture, we would still argue that the decentralized model is not chosen as a way to remove assistance to asylum seekers. In fact, operating decentralized centres may be more demanding than centralized since it requires quite a lot of traveling between the housing units. Moreover it is challenging to find suitable rental dwellings in the market.

### *Homely Qualities*

Decentralized accommodation will in most cases provide more homely qualities than institution-like buildings will do. This may both enable a "normalisation" of the residents and influence their daily residential practices. Van der Horst (2004) concludes that offering homely qualities may answer asylum seekers' needs for autonomy and to some degree give them possibilities to preserve their own culture and everyday habits at the reception centres. She mentions in particular the importance of controlling cooking procedures and meals. This has also some practical aspects, as expressed in the following quote from a young female resident, having shared a 17 square meter room for one and a half years with her husband and child: "...it would be great to have our own private kitchen, as it would make it a lot easier to cook and watch my child at the same time. We are currently sharing kitchen with the whole floor".

### *Privacy Control*

According to some employees, there are fewer conflicts in decentralized housing for asylum seekers than in centralized asylum institutions. This is to some degree supported by the survey of all reception centres (Strumse, Grønseth and Støa forthcoming 2016), although the correlations are not found to be statistically significant. It could be that the conflict level is more related to the number of residents living together than to the organisation of the centre. The following quote suggests the same: "Fewer asylum seekers than in centralized reception centres, lead to lower frustration levels and reduced conflict level" (employee). Informants further emphasized the importance of visiting the homes every week to maintain a good atmosphere in the decentralized units: "We work continuously with attitudes and try to create harmony among the resident. However, living together is all about personality and chemistry, sometimes it gets too difficult. If anybody gets bullied, we move the persons that bullies, not the victim" (employee).

Research carried out on women's perception of safety conclude that many of them feel safer when they do not have to live in the same building as men with whom they do not have any family relations, and that decentralized housing may secure the private sphere of both single women and families with children (Skogøy, 2008). On the other hand, decentralized accommodation may limit the opportunities to discover violence in families (Berg & Sveeas, 2005), which again underlines staff responsibility for following up the residents in the housing units.

It seems from both the survey (Strumse, Grønseth and Støa forthcoming 2016) and the case studies (Hauge, Denizou and Støa 2015) that room and flat size and the number of residents per room, are factors that are more correlated to conflict level than to the organisation model. In order to reduce the conflict level in reception centres, it may therefore be more important to provide more private space for residents than to offer decentralized housing units. Single rooms and enough personal space for individuals and families are particularly important in the creation of positive relations with others, which according to Ryff (1989) is an important dimension of well-being. Warm, trusting, interpersonal relations are affected by the possibilities for personal life, and conflicts more easily emerge when living too crowded. The longer the residents have to stay, the more precarious the lack of space for personal life will be. This *may* be easier to secure in decentralized accommodation, but not necessarily. We will return to this issue in the section discussing housing qualities in decentralized centres.

### *Supporting Integration Processes*

Not only does decentralized accommodation provide more well-being among asylum seekers than centralized models, but the staff is generally of the opinion that living in an ordinary residential environment strengthens integration and contact with the local community at an early stage. According to our informants, the asylum seekers have a better chance of becoming an integrated part of the society through living in a neighbourhood just like "ordinary" Norwegians: "The asylum seekers get more confidence in society, and feel like a part of the society. They live in detached houses just like most people do in x" (employee). They are not "tagged" as asylum seekers through where and how they live. These findings correspond to research presented by Berg and Sveaass (2005) and Drangslund and Fuglseth (2009). We would further strongly argue that most aspects mentioned above such as empowerment, homemaking and privacy control, will support integration processes.

### **Poor Quality: Framing Outsidedness**

Although the building standard in decentralized centres are generally better than in centralized centres (Søholt and Holm 2010; Strumse, Grønseth and Støa forthcoming 2016), the case studies showed that the standard varies considerably. Some of the housing units may be regarded as quite satisfactory as they are functional and not very different from neighbouring buildings. Others appear significantly inferior to the neighbours and worse than most other housing in Norway as exemplified in figures 2a-c.

On-site inspections in decentralized housing units revealed much damaged surfaces, moisture problems, poor insulation, overcrowding and little storage space. In small flats we found objects blocking fire escapes, and flats that were not flexible enough for different constellations of asylum seekers.

Many of the reception centres used temporary housing and barracks that according to some informants no longer ought to be used for human occupation. One of the interviewees stated about a reception centre that: “No other group of residents could have been housed in these types of buildings!” (public health nurse). According to this informant it seems that the term "simple but reasonable housing" used in policy documents on reception centres, in practice is understood as "lower than average standard".

<Figures 2a-c>

The reasons for the run down appearance are not only poor quality of construction, but according to the informants are also due to hard usage. Some groups of asylum seekers are not used to materials and technical solutions that are common in Norwegian housing. In addition, many people share few square meters, and they spend much of the time inside and in their rooms. The employees suggest and wish for more robust materials, but there is no budget for such improvements.

Detached housing may represent comfort and “normality” for many asylum seekers. However, the tight economic frames lead in some cases to overcrowding and irregular use of the dwellings. In one of the case studies, 19 single men lived together in a single family house. Søholt and Holm (2010) also found that the number of residents in each decentralized housing unit often exceeded that which is the average in Norwegian homes. There is a risk that the common rooms will be too small in order to make space for as many bedrooms as possible. In some cases neighbours react negatively when too many young singles, often males, are accommodated in one dwelling. The same applies when many dwellings in their neighbourhood are used for this purpose. Some are even afraid that it will affect the sales prices on neighbouring houses. Such reactions may counteract the integration process. One informant, a reception centre manager, referred to an incident where this scepticism became apparent. The centre had by chance managed to get hold of three detached houses in a row. When they took over the last one, our informant got a concerned phone call from one of the neighbours:

- Will there be one more house for those people?
- What do you mean – ‘those’?
- Those people.. you know..
- But have there been any problems?
- To be honest, actually there hasn’t, but I just wondered how many of the houses here you will have..?

There are also examples among our cases that buildings scheduled for demolition were used to house asylum seekers. Even if quality of such buildings may vary, the employees are aware of the challenges related to the standard of some of them. At the same time they see the

advantages related to flexibility: They do not have to worry about wear and tear and the residents destroying things. It is not necessary to clean up and restore the buildings to their original standard when the contract is ended. However, there is a symbolic element at play here. Using condemned properties will stigmatize the group of residents (Hauge and Støa 2009), and to know that one lives in a condemned building may affect self-acceptance (Ryff 1989). Accommodating asylum seekers in buildings scheduled for demolition further underpins that decisions are based on short-term considerations (Wren, 2007) which in turn do not support integration and equality.

Some employees are quite clear about the significance of clean, nice and tidy environments, exemplified for instance by the statement that “order leads to order, chaos leads to chaos”. This is supported by previous research about how the norms in the environment are important for a better social milieu. If the environment are messy and run down, degradation will escalate (Keizer, Lindenberg and Steg 2008). Nice environments will, according to informants, lead to “improved sleep and quality of life” (employee). Some also emphasize the significance of nice outdoor environments when it comes to establishing and keeping positive relations with neighbors: “To keep the buildings maintained leads to pride, both among employees and residents” (employee). The contrast to the standard in the society in general, for example in public buildings such as schools and shopping centres, may also be read as a symbol of exclusion over time (Dovey [1999] 2008; Hage 2002). The employees have observed that the residents compare the accommodation they are offered with the housing standard they see that the average Norwegians have:

How one lives – I think one adapts very quickly. (..) Regardless how bad the living conditions were earlier, one see how other people live here. So, feeling as an outsider – is something which creates a negative spiral ... this outsideness.

Poor housing standards may be tolerated over shorter periods, but it is a problem if the asylum seekers live in poor buildings for years: “The housing is OK as long as it is temporary; the problem is that many of the asylum seekers live like this for years! The system and the waiting is therefore a greater problem than the housing quality” (employee). Another employee adds:

There are often huge contrasts between living standards in Norway and the country they come from. However, they have often seen pictures and have high expectations for housing standards. They may express disappointment, but some are also positively surprised

Informants claim that the localization of the centre or housing unit, and the possibility for having a private room and bathroom is more important to the asylum seekers than aesthetic and technical standards: “Many would sacrifice quality and size in order to be able to live in the city centre” (employee).

Even though asylum seekers live in ordinary housing in typical Norwegian neighbourhoods, their specific housing units and outdoor areas often stand out from their surrounding houses in a negative manner. Garbage and lack of maintenance may be stigmatizing and thus be regarded as symbols of outsideness. The housing conditions then become a barrier rather than a support for integration. The earlier mentioned benefits of decentralized housing for asylum seekers may thus be influenced by these differences in appearance as housing acts as symbols of being included or excluded. Hauge and Støa (2009) found that if the accommodation becomes a symbol of inclusion and dignity which may be motivating and important for former drug addicts wanting to get their lives back on track. The

same type of symbols, such as “normal” standard of buildings and outdoor areas, may be of importance for the integration of asylum seekers. According to Ryff (1989), self-acceptance is also an important dimension of well-being. To hold positive attitudes towards oneself is influenced by how the standard and appearance of housing act as symbols of inclusion or exclusion.

## **Conclusions**

What happens when ordinary housing becomes temporary accommodation for asylum seekers? Our research shows that decentralized accommodation in contrast to centralized institutions for asylum seekers has many benefits for the residents. The employees’ experience is that the asylum seekers become more independent, active and more integrated when they are moved from an institutional centre to ordinary housing units. Asylum seekers are empowered by living in decentralized housing, and this may strengthen their feelings of well-being. Empowerment of residents relates to autonomy, which Ryff (1989) has to do with self-determination and independence. Especially, empowerment shares meanings with environmental mastery: "active participation in and mastery of the environment" (1071).

### *Normal Houses Become Abnormal*

Imagination plays a key role in the discourse of power since empowerment implies a capacity to perceive one’s real interests and connect them reliably to an imagined future. (Dovey [1998] 2009, 15)

Providing asylum seekers with housing in neighbourhoods equal to the way other Norwegians live creates a possibility for imagining them as "ordinary citizens". However, when the aesthetic and technical standards differs significantly from the rest of the neighbourhood, when the residents are groups of young, single males and not families with children, and when the asylum seekers use their homes and outdoor areas in what is regarded as irregular ways, the effect may be the opposite. The potential advantages of the decentralized housing may thus become stigmatizing and thus frame outsidership instead of integration.

A conclusion to be drawn from this is that it is not sufficient to offer ordinary housing to asylum seekers unless it is followed up with practices that support social inclusion processes. The practices take place in the interrelationship between the built environment and the social life within the neighbourhood. It suggests uses and practices that involve social relations and inclusion processes within the neighbourhood. This indeed can not only be about the asylum seekers becoming “more Norwegian” but just as much about Norwegians opening up for other residential practices which in turn may lead to new kinds of normality in local neighbourhoods. But it also, and that is our main message here, implies a higher degree of consciousness regarding the role of the physical structures. The message communicated through aesthetic and technical standard and building maintenance should not be underestimated.

### *Housing Quality as a Strategy for Integration*

Securing individual dignity and functional ability of asylum seekers are stated as aims in Norwegian policy documents (Official Norwegian Report 2011). Our study demonstrates that many aspects of well-being are deeply influenced by housing, and demonstrates the importance of how asylum seekers are accommodated. Dimensions of well-being, such as self-acceptance and positive relations with others (Ryff 1989), are especially vulnerable when the housing offered acts as symbols of exclusion: “The politics of identity in built form

mediates who we are and where we belong” (Dovey [1998] 2009, 18). This underlines the need to see the physical environment, including organization and localisation as well as aesthetic and technical standard and building maintenance, as part of a strategy that can be used actively to lower conflict levels, promote integration, empower the residents and contribute positively to their well-functioning and self-esteem.

The research supports a further focus on decentralized accommodation for asylum seekers, but the asylum centre management must then consider how the housing quality affects the relationship between the neighborhood and the asylum seekers, and seek to provide housing that do not stand out negatively. Decentralized housing meant to be an advantage for integration, may in extreme cases become the opposite.

If equality is acknowledged as a basic value in a society, as one may believe it is in Norway, this should be reflected in the built environment. According to Lid (2014, 16) ".the planned and built environment signal who is recognized as equal citizens in society. The interaction of people-environment is tight and dynamic and characterized by social development and humanity". These perspectives are relevant, not only for asylum seekers, but for several other more or less marginalized groups in society. Having the opportunity to participate on equal terms with others, understood as a dimension of social justice, is a human right. The built environment contributes to the recognition or lack of recognition of various groups as equal in the society. Planners, authorities and politicians have a special responsibility for people that are not in the position to choose their own dwellings. It is therefore highly problematic when asylum seekers are offered housing which hinders their participation in the local community and which represents both practical and symbolic barriers for inclusion and equality.

## **Funding**

The article is based on research funded by the Norwegian Research Council under grant [number 213091/F10] and the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI).

## **Disclosure statement**

The authors have no financial interests in the study and are not aware of any conflicting interest in relation to the study.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Because of the large number of new asylum seekers arriving during the autumn 2015, so called arrival centres (or arrival transit centres) are established, where people stay only a few days in order to be registered by the police immigration unit and in the reception system, and to have a health check. In addition, there are established a number of temporary accommodation units where the asylum seekers can stay waiting to be transferred to an ordinary reception centre. See: <http://www.udi.no/en/word-definitions/asylmottak-ulike-typer/> [Accessed 2015-12-04] In addition to so called "ordinary reception centres" there are specialised centres or units for unaccompanied minors and reinforced centres for asylum-seekers with psychiatric issues or other special needs.

<sup>2</sup> The number of asylum seekers living in so-called ordinary reception centres has however increased by less than 2000 persons since most of the newcomers by the end of 2015 still live in transit centres waiting to be accommodated in an ordinary centres (Norwegian Directorate of Immigration 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Based on an interview with the CEO of UDI, Frode Forvang, dated 19.11.2015. See: <http://www.nrk.no/norge/udi - -vi-ma-planlegge-100.000-mottaksplasser-i-2016-1.12661948> [Accessed 2015.12.02]

<sup>4</sup> According to statistics from UDI, two thirds were granted residency in 2014 (Norwegian Directorate of Immigration 2015b). In September 2015 this share has increased to 75 percent. See: <http://www.nrk.no/norge/tre-av-fire-asyloskere-far-bli-i-norge-1.12590862> [Accessed 2016-01-15]

<sup>5</sup> The number as based on information from the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) (personal communication) dated December 1. 2014. It must be underlined that the situation one year after is quite different. The high number of new asylum seekers entering the country will undoubtedly lead to a prolongation of the waiting time at the reception centres.

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<sup>6</sup> Please note that the main data collection is carried out before the autumn 2015, and will therefore not capture the last months' rather drastic changes within the sector.

<sup>7</sup> In Norwegian the term "Nøkternt men forsvarlig" is used. We have chosen to translate "forsvarlig" with "reasonable" although this is not a fully adequate term. *Forsvarlig* means not only *reasonable*, understood as *proper*, *sound* and *safe* but has also connotations to *dignity* and *decency*.

<sup>8</sup> Named after its leader, Gunnar Berge, former minister in various Labor Party Governments

<sup>9</sup> The survey was carried out as a web-survey to the managers of all Norwegian reception centres in 2013, altogether 105 centres at the time, and had a response rate of 85,7 percent (Strumse et al, forthcoming 2016).

<sup>10</sup> The PhD work is carried out by Ragne Øwre Thorshaug and is planned to be finalised in 2017.

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**Table 1: Case Studies**

<b>Reception type</b>	<b>centre</b>	<b>Region of Norway</b>	<b>Centralized/ decentralized, size</b>	<b>Type of building</b>	<b>Management</b>
1 Ordinary, reinforced dep.+ single minors		Middle	Partly decentralized, 140 places	Barracks + flats	Municipality
2 Transit		Inner	Centralized, 400	Disused military camp	Non-profit association
3 Ordinary		East	Centralized, 175	Disused hotel	Private owners
4 Ordinary		Inner	Decentralized, 132	Disused hotel + flats	Non-profit association
5 Ordinary		North	Decentralized, 275	Flats + block of bedsits	Private owners
6 ordinary, reinforced dep.		South	Partly decentralized, 700	Flats + block of bedsits, detached houses	Cooperation between 5 municipalities
7 Ordinary + single minors		West	Partly decentralized, 230	Flats and detached houses	Private organization of operators

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## Figure captions

**Figure 1a-c:** Examples of housing used for decentralized reception centres. *Photos: nn (figure 1a); nn (figures 1b and c)*

**Figure 2a-c:** Examples of low standard and moisture problems in decentralized reception centres. Figure 2a: Sleeping room window with insufficient daylight conditions. *Photo: nn.* Figure 2b and c: Worn down surfaces and moisture in kitchen and bathroom. *Photos: nn*