



# Anthropology and Architecture: Motives and Ethics in Creating Knowledge

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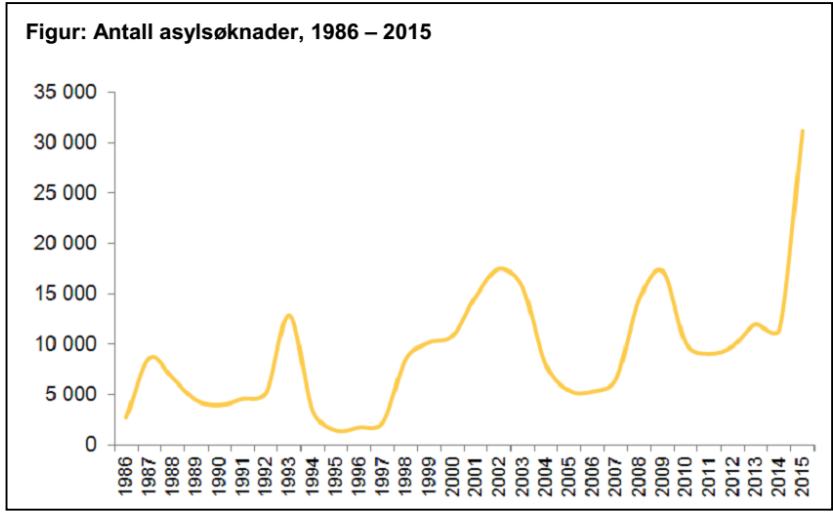
## Asylum seeker reception centres in Norway

*"... governmental asylum centres should provide **simple but reasonable** accommodation securing the residents' basic requirements and needs for safety" (UDI, 2008)*

- **Housing types:** Former institutions and hotels, inexpensive ordinary housing on the rental market
- Characteristics of asylum centres:
  - **Temporariness** due to short operating contracts because of variations in the number of asylum seekers
  - **Overcrowded** old buildings - often built for other purposes than providing housing
  - 50 % of the centres reports on **poor technical standard** (Strumse et al, 2016)



Trondheim and Heimly reception centre. Photos: E Støa and RØ Thorshaug



Number of asylum seekers 1986-2015. Source: udi.no

# Asylum seekers in Norway in numbers

## Asylum seekers

2017: **3560** | 2016: 3460 | 2015: **31 150**

## Reception centers

2018: **31** | 2016: 152 | 2015: **305**

## Residents in reception centers

2018: **4030\*** | 2016: **22589** | 2015: 17699

**Average stay in reception centers: 625 days** [of which 205 days waiting to get settled in a municipality] (Weiss et al, 2017)

\* August 2018 (udi.no)



Photo: R Ø Thorshaug

# What Buildings do: The Effect of the Physical Environment on Quality of Life of Asylum Seekers

*An interdisciplinary research project funded by the Norwegian Research Council and UDI for the period 2012-2017*

## Research objectives

- Study what the physical environment – buildings, outdoor environments and localization – may do for the well-being of asylum seekers and their relationship to the local community
- Influence practice: Suggest ideas for improvements and innovation

## *Participants*

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Photo: A S Grønseth

## Theoretical perspectives (1): Complexities in creation of knowledge

- Persons, Relations and Materiality
- Our aim: Stimulate ethical concern that encourage respect for human equality and diversity
- Anthropology: traditionally sought to ensure social progress (in the West) by means of knowledge – social reform seen as an harmonious task
- Colonial anthropology, applied anthropology, critical anthropology
- Moral commitment and defending the rights of the oppressed (- or «moral anxiety»?)
- The fundamentals for knowledge creation match the fundamentals of ethics (?)
- The epistemology for social studies are similar and accommodate moral values that guide social reform for the better and wellbeing of its populations



Photo: A S Grønseth

## Theoretical perspectives (2): Approach to Architecture and materiality

- Recent work on materiality and architecture tend to focus on discursive, semiotic or mental aspects
- We see material qualities as having an inherently relational quality that exist within relational context of action, material and environment (T. Ingold)
- We see places of dwelling as an extension of the person and self (P. Bourdieu)
- Thus, houses are seen not only as places or «cases» of symbolism, but as interplaying subjects (Humphrey)
- Houses reinforce and shape social relations and senses of belonging and wellbeing



Photo: A S Grønseth

## Methods and Case Study

- Web-survey and selected 1 day case-visits to document the material housing offered for asylum seekers with concern for access and quality
- Ethnographic fieldwork at 4 selected reception center, here Open River Asylum Seeker Reception Center (August-December 2014)
- Engaging with persons, being with and participating in ongoing activities
- Architectural documentation (registrations, drawing plans, sketches, photos etc)
- Paying attention to accessibility, materiality, aesthetics, movement, who, where, when





Photo: A S Grønseth

## **Aamuun, Woman, Somalia, mid-twenties, Asylum-Seeker, Positive Resolution:**

“The camp is our transition to Norway. It is our doorstep. ....

There is no place to keep our things, no place to dry our clothing. My shoes and garbage are kept next to my food-storage and kitchen utensils. It is not right. It makes me feel uncomfortable. ....

I come for humanity, not to be spoken to and treated like animals. Humanity is in Norway, but not for us. Sometimes I feel like not to make the effort. I am tired. I tell myself I need to try. We live outside society.”



Photo: A S Grønseth

## **Akram, Man, Irak, late twenties, Asylum-Seeker, Negative Resolution:**

“Here is like a prison. But it is worse than a prison, because we do not know when we are finished. ....

My bedroom is very small and I share with one more. I do not like to make food in the kitchen. It is often dirty. We live like in a hole. ....

It is not for human beings to live here. People get tired and sick. I have constant head-aches and cannot sleep. The most important I have is my religion, my faith. It keeps me going.”

## The Place and Practice of Housing and Dwelling

- Houses and dwellings cannot be assessed in their own terms – they are always linked to the surroundings and the persons who engage with them
- A hotel building in which hotel guests felt appreciated
- The same hotel building in which asylum seekers felt degrading
- Buildings as a process with moments for stoppages that illustrate and enable social life (Strathern 1999) – highlights the relational quality
- Organisation of space and material structures exercise power and create distinctions (Foucault 2000) – as here: the «Other» from «us»

## Architectural approaches

- Architectural approach: Normative and educative role in shaping the physical environment and meet functional, social and emotional needs: Add value to society
- Perspectives on **housing quality**:
  - as shaped in the interplay between people and their material surroundings, requiring insight into different residents' situation, prerequisites and values (analytic)
  - as an embedded property of the object itself, implying that it is possible to distinguish between better and worse quality (essentialist)
- **Architectural agency**: Understanding dwelling, houses and materiality as holding a relational and agentive force that feed into social life (Awan et al 2011)

## What buildings do?

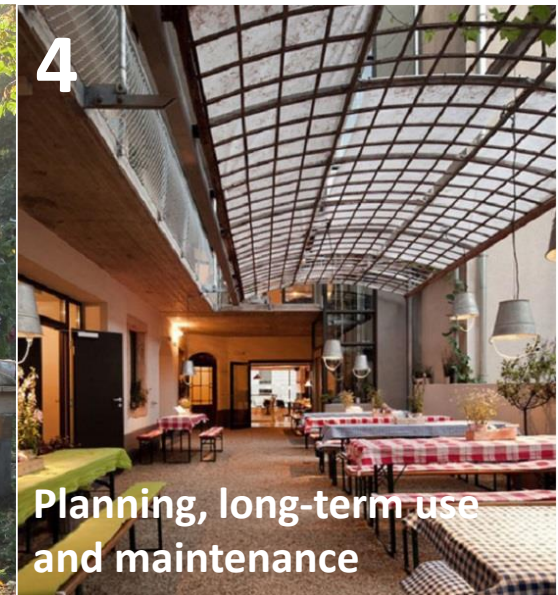
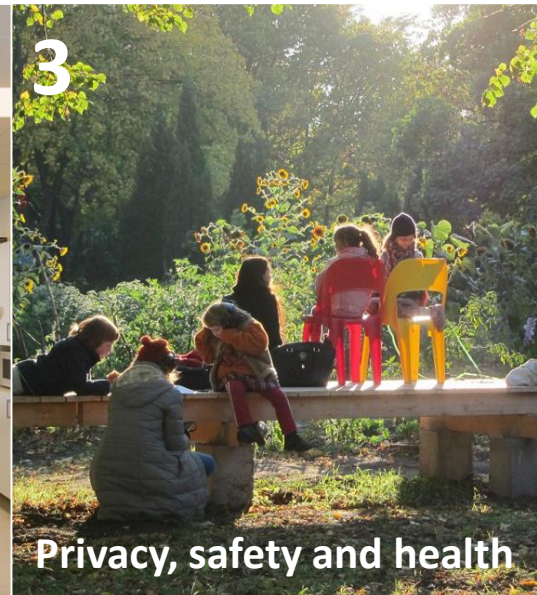
- Built environment as an agent for change (Awan et al, 2011)
- Architecture as *"the object of human agency and as an agent of its own actors"* and further as *"simultaneously shaped and shaping."* (Gieryn, 2002)
- Embedding architecture in practice (Jacobs and Merriman, 2011)
- "being-in-the-world-ness of architecture... raise... fundamental questions of how architecture enacts, how it performs, and consequently, how it might "act otherwise" or **lead to other possible futures**" (Doucet & Cupers, 2009:1)



## Influencing practice: Guidelines

Aims to **support fundamental housing qualities in Norwegian reception centers** by:

- Describing qualities that should be aimed at (*not* defining minimum standards and specific solutions)
- Providing a basis in order to make better judgements when establishing and assessing centers
- Inspire to innovation / show possibilities



## Creating Ethical Knowledge on Dwelling

- We suggest that by employing ethnographic methods and a combination of anthropological and architectural perspectives that recognise the creation of knowledge as always taking place in relations between persons and between persons and materiality:

*Our study creates a mode of knowledge that reaches beyond the factual and visual, and adds an approach that can open for an ethic of mutual respect and cosmopolitan solidarity - so crucial when dealing with sensitive and political issues of belonging and wellbeing in everyday life and the shaping of a new future in radical new environments.*

- This implies speaking up for not only what is inadequate housing quality for a vulnerable group, but also which qualities should be aimed for in order to provide better situations for asylum seekers

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