

What Buildings do

Seminar on the Effect of the Physical Environment in Reception centers for Asylum seekers

The seminar will deal with questions of how architectural features of reception centers may facilitate positive social processes, lower conflict levels, secure and inspire the residents to an increased activity level, and improve contact between asylum seekers and the local community - thereby contributing to improving the mental health and self-esteem of the asylum seekers. Researchers from Norway and the Netherlands will discuss their respective research findings, as well as debate theoretical approaches and potential practical outcomes.

Date and time: Thursday 17 October 2013, 14.00-17.45

Venue: VU University, Main building (3rd floor) Agora room 3, De Boelelaan 1105, Amsterdam.

Program:

14.00-14.05: Welcome by [Domenica Ghidea Biidu](#), Netherlands Institute of Human Rights & member of the executive board of EQUINET, the European Network of Equality Bodies.

14.05-14.45: [What Buildings Do](#) – presentations of a Norwegian Research Initiative about the Physical Environment in Reception Centers by [Eli Støa](#) and [Ragne Øwre Thorshaug](#), NTNU Faculty of Architecture and Fine Arts & [Einar Strumse](#), Lillehammer University College, Environmental psychology. Discussant: Karin Geuijen, Utrecht University, Organizational Sciences.

14.45-15.15: [The normality and materiality of the dominant discourse – Perspectives from inside a Dutch asylum centre](#) by Robert Larruina & [Halleh Ghorashi](#), VU University, Sociology. Discussant: [Anne Sigfrid Grønseth](#), Lillehammer University College, Social Anthropology.

15.15-15.30: Questions

15.30 -15.45: Break

15.45-16.15: [The meaning of housing qualities for homeless people](#) by [Åshild Lappegard Hauge](#), SINTEF Building and Infrastructure, Environmental psychology. Discussant: [Sander Kramer](#), Utrecht University School of Governance.

16.15-16.25: Questions

16.25-17.15: Wrap-up and discussion

17.15-17.45: Drinks

The seminar is organized in cooperation between VU University Amsterdam's Migration Diversity Centre and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim.

Participants will be researchers based in both countries, representing various fields (architecture, psychology, anthropology, sociology and geography) as well as representatives from immigration authorities, reception center operational organizations as well as associations working with refugees and asylum seekers.

Registration: Please send an e-mail with your name and affiliation to the Migration and Diversity Centre (mdc@vu.nl), before **10 October 2013**.

On behalf of the organizers,

Professor Halleh Ghorashi / Migration Diversity Centre / VU University Amsterdam– the Netherlands
Professor Eli Støa / Faculty of Architecture and Fine Arts / NTNU – Norway

Abstracts

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

Eli Støa, Ragne Thorshaug and Einar Strumse

The presentation will introduce a newly started research project focusing both upon the effect physical environments may have for the well-being of asylum seekers and their relationship with the local community. The research will study how architectural features of reception centers may facilitate positive social processes, lower conflict levels, secure and inspire the residents to an increased activity level, and improve contact between asylum seekers and local community - thereby contributing to improving the mental health and self-esteem of the asylum seekers. The project will be based on case studies, survey, qualitative interviews, and typology studies. It aims to provide practical knowledge on the physical aspects that are important to address during the different stages of planning, rehabilitation and operation of asylum centers. Even if the focus is on asylum seekers, the results are also relevant for other types of vulnerable residential groups, especially groups in need of temporary housing. The project therefore aims to develop theories on housing as a strategy for improving life conditions for vulnerable groups of residents.

The presentation will outline some theoretical considerations made in the early stages of the research. It will further present selected results from a web-survey done to the management of all Norwegian reception centers (n=105) during Spring 2013, with a response rate of 85,7 %. The purpose of the survey was to obtain an initial overview over the situation at reception centers covering issues such as location, center type, capacity, functional and aesthetical building features, types of dwellings offered, indoor and outdoor qualities, building maintenance, relationship to neighbors, public transportation, residents' health and well-being, cultural and social environment, conflict level and perceived security at the centers.

The normality and materiality of the dominant discourse: Perspectives from inside a Dutch asylum seeker centre

Robert Larruina & Halleh Ghorashi

This paper explores the current dominant discourse on asylum seekers and refugees in the Netherlands, as identified through interviews with the members of Vrolijkheid, a charitable organization that works inside thirty asylum seeker centres. This discourse has two distinctive forms. One is the societal discourse, which includes normalized negative images of asylum seekers. The other is the materiality of the discourse, which is the material translation of this societal discourse in asylum seeker centres (AZCs). Michel Foucault's (1977) ideas concerning architecture and power, along with Erving Goffman (2007) concept of total institutions, provide a theoretical frame for exploring both the societal and material aspects of the dominant discourse. We argue that AZCs provide the perfect opportunity for looking at the ways in which the invisible, taken for granted power of discourse is combined with visible materiality of exclusion. This combination of normality and materiality is so powerful that almost no alternative is imaginable. Yet, as this study shows, the work of Vrolijkheid in AZCs is slowly creating spaces for new ways of looking at the situation and for change.

The meaning of housing qualities for homeless people

Åshild Hauge

This case-study explores the meaning of architectural qualities for the identity of formerly homeless criminals and drug abusers. It describes a social housing project where the architecture was intended to positively affect this group of residents. Interviews with initiator, employees and residents were conducted, as well as studies of statements by the jury of the Norwegian State Award for Building Tradition 2007, and presentations of the housing project in the media. The residents and employees were in general satisfied with the housing situation. The residents appreciated and took care of architectural qualities, and the environment inspired them to protect it. They were proud of their apartments, and had more contact with their families and children as a

result. The social network expressed hope and pride in them because of an attractive housing situation. Some residents saw architectural details as symbols of a crime- and drug-free life and identity. This may have significance for consolidating a new identity as non-drug-abuser, and may further have significance in motivating change. The study also gives an example of how positive associations with the building may change according to life situation. The symbolic content of objects and environments is under constant influence of situational changes and social interaction. The presentation will also include suggestions on how these findings can be transferred to asylum seekers and their housing situation.

[Ref: Hauge, Å. L & Støa, E. (2009). "Here you get a little extra push": The meaning of architectural quality in housing for the formerly homeless – a case study of Veiskillet in Trondheim, Norway. *Nordic Journal of Architectural Research*, 1, p. 18-31.]