

LIVING ON THE THRESHOLD: THE MISSING DEBATE ON PERI-URBAN ASYLUM RECEPTION CENTRES IN NORWAY, 2015-16

Anne Hege Simonsen and Marianne Skjulhaug

ABSTRACT

In 2016, almost 40 per cent of Norwegian asylum reception centres (ARCs) were located in so-called peri-urban landscapes across the country. In media coverage and central planning documents, however, geographical location seems rarely to be considered as potentially crucial to the well-being of asylum seekers or their integration. While peri-urban locations do not necessarily mean poor living standards, the location certainly influences practical opportunities to participate in the host community. The key objective of this interdisciplinary study is to investigate location as a parameter for how asylum seekers engage in their temporary neighbourhoods/communities and as an essential factor in preventing hostile *othering* processes. By highlighting aspects of peri-urban conditions, such as temporality, sense of place, and community, this study identifies vital dilemmas and challenges connected to the intertwining of public and political discourse with the physical realities of regional and urban space.

KEYWORDS

location, peri-urban, asylum reception centres, othering, asylum seekers

INTRODUCTION

In 2015–16, the Syrian crisis prompted an unprecedented influx of refugees to Norway. At its peak, the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (Utlendingsdirektoratet, UDI) offered approximately 39,000 beds in mostly improvised reception centres. Publications such as the Norwegian real-estate magazine *Estate Vest* bluntly and tellingly asked: ‘May anything serve as an asylum reception centre?’¹ The magazine argued for the economic possibilities of converting abandoned hospitals, military barracks, factories, warehouses, hotels, and even office buildings into asylum reception centres (ARCs). Even though ARC contracts must be renewed every three years, and there are limited resources to upgrade physical structures for housing purposes,² the magazine drew positive conclusions about the potential of asylum reception centres as temporary business opportunities.

By 2018, Norway had radically reduced the national capacity to receive refugees. According to the UDI, only 4,014 people lived in ARCs in April 2018 as a result of the Norwegian government’s new strict immigration policy. The year 2015 saw 31,150 asylum seekers come to Norway, but the number dropped by 89 per cent to less than 3,500 in 2016.³ These numbers show that the refugee influx is far from constant and partly explain the common use of permanent structures as temporary ARCs in Norway in urban, suburban, and peri-urban areas. The temporary nature of ARCs appears to be intended and is stressed in official documents (e.g. Rundskriv H-4/15). The former Minister of Justice Anders Anundsen further highlighted impermanence as a government decision in November 2015, when he rebutted asylum seekers’ complaints about the standards of the ARCs to which they were assigned. An ARC ‘is not a holiday home,’ Anundsen stated, and the asylum seekers were ‘free to leave’ if they were not content.⁴

In Norway, ARCs accommodate refugees who are applying for asylum in the country, and all actors involved conceptualize ARCs as short-term dwellings. ARCs are established through collaboration among the government, municipalities, and public and private operators, organizations, and property owners. ARCs are centralized (often abandoned hotels, hospitals, and building complexes) or decentralized (individual apartments linked to a central office). It should be noted that these two types refer to the organizing principles, not the location.

In recent academic studies, the buildings' physical condition has been described as crucial to how ARCs may contribute to the asylum seekers' quality of life. Åshild Lappegard Hauge, Karine Denizou, and Eli Støa have highlighted the negative impacts of mediocre or low housing standards on asylum seekers' lives.⁵ The location has not received the same scholarly attention, despite the expectation that Norwegian ARCs will provide means for residents to be 'active participants' in the local community.⁶ In July 2016, we found that many temporary facilities were located in peri-urban settings, far from everyday services, cultural amenities, and lively, populated urban environments. This situation can decrease asylum seekers' opportunities for community participation, and there is little to no systematic knowledge of if and how peri-urban ARCs can perform this social function.

The refugee influx to Norway has diminished, but the international refugee crisis has not been resolved. While the number of ARCs in Norway has fallen dramatically since 2016, we find experiences from 2015 to 2016 still relevant for the discussion on how refugees can participate in Norwegian communities on an everyday basis. There are still lessons to be learned that relate to broader questions of migration, temporality, and community building in urbanizing regions. Our study centres on three research questions:

1. What was Norway's actual response to accommodating asylum seekers during the acute refugee crisis in 2015–16?
2. To what extent is the location of ARCs a factor in the public debate on asylum seekers' integration and well-being?
3. What do essential planning and policy documents say about community integration when accommodating asylum seekers?

Our goal is to identify critical dilemmas and challenges related to the reception of refugees when public and political discourse intertwine with physical realities on the ground.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section explains three significant concepts that compose the study's theoretical approach: *nærmiljø* (local community), used as the term for a particular view of community-based integration; *peri-urbanity*, viewed as a uniquely challenging location; and *othering processes*, which provide a way to understand the intersection of political, public, and experienced marginalization. These concepts relate to separate but overlapping academic fields,

including social anthropology, architecture/urbanism, and media studies. In general, most research agrees that host communities contribute to asylum seekers' social, mental, and physical welfare.⁷ Official policies also highlight the importance of belonging to a community. Although asylum seekers in Norway should stay in ARCs only temporarily, the average stay is 625 days, slightly less than two years. A recent study by Nerina Weiss, Anne Britt Djuve, Wendy Hamelink, and Huafeng Zhang⁸ found no apparent connection between time spent in ARCs and the ability to connect to a community. This research, however, did not consider the locations of ARCs in different kinds of communities as a variable.

***Nærmiljø*: A Close-Knit Community**

'Community' is a rather blurry concept with a multitude of meanings that need to be untangled to be analytically useful. In a Norwegian context, a community can mean anything from the Norwegian society as a whole to a local neighbourhood. For our purposes, we focus on the concept of *nærmiljø* as particularly relevant since the term is used in the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration's official documents. The term *nærmiljø* coins a local community where shared geographical location creates a sense of solidarity that, although significantly weaker, shares common traits with kinship.⁹ *Nærmiljø* became a core term in urban planning in the 1970s as a result of, but also in opposition to, urban planning that people conceptualized as cold and dehumanizing compared to the idealized version of rural life.¹⁰ *Nærmiljø* has since been reconceptualized as a reaction to, amongst others, neoliberal urban development and negative gentrification processes, exemplified through, for instance, the so-called *områdeløft* processes (area-based initiatives), a particular methodology developed to improve quality of living in deprived urban districts.¹¹

In a Scandinavian and Norwegian context, *nærmiljø* is conceptualized as home-centred: an environment constituted around the home.¹² On a symbolic level, the concept thus establishes an inherent structural challenge for any ARC, which by default emphasizes the temporary, in contrast to the permanent position of a home-based community.

Nærmiljø has mostly positive connotations. The term is closely connected to everyday life and designates physical and social activities as well as feelings of belonging. The term emphasizes an arena where individuals participate and express themselves in ways anchored in their homes, or in other site-specific relations.¹³ A *nærmiljø* further provides people with a certain degree

of social services, transport, and recreation. Since the term can be found in several central documents concerning approval of asylum reception centres in Norway, it is particularly relevant in our context. The concept of *nærmiljø* serves as a key term to better understand the role of community and belonging when accommodating refugees.

THE PERI-URBAN LOCATION

Asylum seekers are often located in spaces seen as 'remote' or 'outside' the traditional social systems of the city.¹⁴ In a crisis, this seems to be a rather universally established pattern, due to the need for short-term responses in combination with limited financial means. In a recent study, comparing the Netherlands, Germany, and the United Kingdom, Klaudia Mierswa documented that ARCs are predominantly located in remote areas and that this often provokes strong reactions from asylum seekers who feel cut off from society.¹⁵

The term peri-urban can in its simplest way be understood as a condition in-between the urban (including the suburban) and the rural.¹⁶ Peri-urban areas are characterized by a multilayered coexistence of urban and rural land uses. They are often disconnected from local facilities and services as well as from public transportation, and they are often socially fragmented and unevenly populated. Studies claim that peri-urban areas suffer from a lack of political interest and, as a result, they become easily subjected to unplanned interventions and temporary uses.¹⁷

The German urban planner and theorist Thomas Sieverts claims that everyday life in peri-urban areas is insular and fragmented, as most transportation to different activities depends on motorized, private vehicles.¹⁸ Public space, if existing, often lacks operative coordination that can support an everyday living space where everyday needs are met and organized within reachable distances. Unresolved challenges in peri-urban areas are well documented, but appear not to be taken into account when a significant proportion of ARCs are established in these areas. The dominant pattern of locating ARCs in peri-urban conditions, confirms the dynamics and characteristics of peri-urban space as being a flexible receptor of functions of an immediate or temporary character, thus reflecting a range of emerging and yet unrecognized social uses of space.

Over the last few years, there has been a growing international awareness of the city as a productive place for accommodating refugees. The city is seen both as a hub for initial reception and transit, but also as presenting refu-

gees with possible anchors for more permanent settling.¹⁹ We suggest that peri-urbanity, which is currently a prominent location category for ARCs in Norway, does not provide these possibilities. Peri-urban locations do not necessarily equal bad living standards. They do, however, represent challenges that are not found in more central, urban areas. For instance, peri-urban social conditions can easily exclude certain groups, such as asylum seekers, in the unfolding of everyday life and from taking part in a larger community due to lack of communications and to an absence of points of interaction.

Recent studies of asylum seekers' well-being point in the same direction. Hauge et al. have, as mentioned above, primarily examined housing qualities, but their study briefly mentions location as an aspect worthy of further investigation.²⁰ The report states that location probably influences the physical and mental health of the inhabitants in 25 per cent of the ARCs analysed. Outside the scope of the study, Hauge et al. list a series of requirements for the asylum seekers' well-being that is directly linked to location:

- seeing other people
- short distances to public transportation
- easy access to (leisure) activities and central areas, including schools, doctors, and grocery shops in walking distance.²¹

Nice scenery and a clean and aesthetically pleasant environment are also mentioned as important factors for well-being. It should also be noted that the study suggests that location is of less significance if the ARC is socially and practically well-functioning and favourably connected to public transportation. On the other hand, we find substantial support in theory suggesting that the location of ARCs has implications regarding the asylum seekers' relations to society at large. The urban theorist David Graham Shane explains the peri-urban condition as heterotopia:

It is an important place of urban experimentation and change, handling nonconforming urban activities and contributing to the overall stability of the city through its capacity to host change. . . . Foucault pointed to prisons, hospitals, clinics, asylums, courthouses and clinics as heterotopias of 'deviance' that helped give birth to the modern city by removing people who were ill, could not work or did not fit in the city, accelerating the shift to a modern, efficient, industrial society.²²

Shane underlines the peri-urban as a flexible receptor for several urban programs, or *urban activities* as he frames it, that for different reasons do not fit into the city. In our view, the location of ARCs fit this description.

OTHERING PROCESSES

Peri-urban location can be expected to have bearings on the asylum seekers' likelihood to address and be included in a Norwegian *nærmiljø*. Mierswa's study from 2016 establishes a pattern of peripheral and remote locations of ARCs in the European context, and their inhabitants perceive remote location as a sign of not being wanted. Peripheral and remote location patterns thus may be read as indicators of unwanted othering processes. When we invoke othering as a relevant concept in this context, we stand on the shoulders of influential authors writing about the powers of conscious and unconscious discourses that aim to create and maintain global political power structures. As highlighted by Foucault, locating marginal and possibly transgressing groups in peripheral areas is an act of political expression.²³ However, how do we talk about such matters, and are we conscious of them?

We believe that it is relevant to analyse the location of ARCs through the lenses of othering processes in public discourse, and in particular in the media. Ultimately, othering processes in the media relate to the classification and division of people into insiders and outsiders. Such divisions may be activated on different levels, for example, politically (as citizens versus non-citizens), ethnically, religiously, and in other sorts of identity-shaping categories. When the media create categories of others, they also create notions of 'us'. Benedict Anderson has noted, for instance, how newspapers contribute to nation-state building processes by creating so-called 'imagined communities' that connect people across geographical distance.²⁴ Classification thus implies two processes: inclusion and exclusion. All sorts of classification also create an ambiguous zone, as chaos is a by-product of order. Ambiguity is often followed by uneasiness since we do not have preformatted behavioral schemes to lean on when we deal with them. Groups that we consider peripheral often appear as ambivalent, and thus as something unclean, disorderly, or what Mary Douglas has labelled 'matter out of place'.²⁵

Asylum seekers can be seen as 'matter out of place', both physically and symbolically. They are strangers, not necessarily foes, but not necessarily friends either. According to Zygmunt Baumann, the stranger has traits of both:

The stranger . . . made his way into the life-world *uninvited*, thereby casting me on the receiving side of his initiative, making me into the object of action of which he is the subject: all this . . . is a notorious mark of the *enemy*. Yet, unlike other, 'straightforward' enemies, he is not kept at a secure distance, nor on the other side of the battle line. Worse still, he claims a right to be an object of *responsibility*—the well-known attribute of the *friend*. If we press upon him the friend/enemy opposition, he would come out simultaneously under- and over-determined. And thus, by proxy, he would expose the failing of the opposition itself. He is a constant threat to the world's order.²⁶

The stranger is physically close, yet may be mentally and culturally far away. The stranger synthesizes proximity and distance. In a Norwegian context, this may be even harder to cope with than in other European countries, because of a strong tradition to equal concepts of likeness and equality.²⁷

METHODOLOGY

Our study examines how Norwegian ARCs are located, in what physical context their accommodation is chosen, and how these shelters are communicated, directly and indirectly, in Norwegian media. The media component was added because we believe that the mediation of physical shelters can provide important information about the way that refugees' security, rights, and living conditions are negotiated within the Norwegian public sphere and its overlay with perceptions of the city, for the relocation of people is a spatial question.

As an organizing principle, we have triangulated quantitative and qualitative research methods with the aim of examining the agency of location in three entangled 'sites', namely:

- Physical location, according to three categories: central urban, suburban, and peri-urban
- Planning and policy documents, on a general level
- Domestic media discourse

We have triangulated a series of research methods to be able to produce relevant research material. The following studies have been conducted to inform our three above-mentioned 'sites':

- A quantitative analysis of where Norway's 240 (2016) registered asylum reception centres were located
- A quantitative analysis of 24,000 media entries drawn from the print and online media database Retriever in the period from 18 May 2015 to 18 June 2016
- A qualitative media analysis of selected ARCs
- Qualitative interviews with employees and users of selected ARCs
- Field observations
- Document and literature studies

To determine the physical location of the ARCs, we studied geographical maps and aerial photographs (mostly from Google Earth), and we classified them according to three categories: central urban, suburban, and peri-urban areas. (These categories should not be confused with the two governmental typologies mentioned in the introduction—centralized and decentralized ARCs—as they represent organizing principles, not location.)

Central-urban: Central urban areas are characterized by short transaction distances and offer public and private services, shopping facilities, and amenities. The category does not distinguish the sizes of villages, towns, or cities. Notably, the reception centres are quite evenly distributed throughout the country, except for the five largest cities, where we find the lowest number of ARCs per capita (see Figure 1).

Suburban: Suburban areas are limited to mainly residential areas and lack the diverse mix of programs (understood as functional content in the built-up fabric) that creates a central urban condition. The suburban category has longer transaction distances, however, and ARCs are often well connected to local centres, schools, sports facilities, and so forth, by cycle paths and public transport.

Peri-urban: Peri-urban areas are characterized by a multilayered coexistence of fragmented and different land uses found in-between the rural and the urban and an uneven pattern of habitation. Peri-urban areas often lack good connections to urban centres and also to well-established neighbourhoods. Transaction distances are fragmented and longer than in the two other categories.

FINDINGS: PERIPHERAL LOCATION AS A PERIPHERAL TOPIC

In this section, we present our findings according to the three ‘sites’ described above: physical location, planning and policy documents, and media discourse. We start with the physical site and present the concrete distribution of ARCs in Norway in 2016. We then give an account of some relevant international and national documents on UN/EU and national governmental levels that relate to planning, and we discuss in what manner and to what degree they actively

Name of county	Population (2016)	Number of ARCs per county	Peri-urban location	Sub-urban location	Urban location
Nordland	242,000	30	9	9	8
Vest-Agder	183,000	23	12	1	4
Troms	164,000	20	8	4	3
Rogaland	470,000	17	2	4	11
Møre og Romsdal	265,000	17	5	2	7
Nord-Trøndelag	136,000	15	5	1	6
Oppland	189,000	14	7	1	5
Hordaland	516,000	14	5	4	3
Sogn og Fjordane	110,000	13	6	3	4
Aust-Agder	116,000	13	4	1	6
Hedmark	195,000	11	8	3	0
Buskerud	278,000	10	5	0	4
Østfold	290,000	8	4	3	1
Telemark	172,000	8	2	1	5
Sør-Trøndelag	313,000	7	3	1	2
Finnmark	76,000	6	2	1	3
Akershus	595,000	6	4	0	2
Vestfold	245,000	6	2	0	4
Oslo	658,000	2	0	1	1
Total		240	93	40	79

Fig 1. The number of ARCs in Norwegian counties in August 2016, correlated with location and population numbers

deal with different types of location strategies or criteria. Finally, we look at how, and to what degree, location plays a role in public discourse, and whether or not the discourse can be seen as contributing to othering processes. The field observations and interviews conducted at our two selected ARCs serve to qualify and deepen the perspective on the other findings.

Location Site: Remote Physical Study

In August 2016, we found that a substantial number of the Norwegian ARCs were located in areas outside of villages and town centres.

It was discovered that 39 per cent of ARCs were located in peri-urban conditions, a finding that resonates with the remote location patterns found in other European countries.²⁸ Regarding the rest of the ARCs, 17 per cent were located in suburban areas, 32 per cent in central urban areas, and 12 per cent were not identifiable by our research criteria as the address given likely refers to an administrative entity and not the reception centre location. Therefore, though not confirmed, we assume that this 12 per cent figure represents so-called decentralized ARCs and therefore cannot be defined geographically without access to sensitive information.

To illustrate the social aspects of a peri-urban location, we offer the example of the ARC at Bjørnebekk in Ås, some forty minutes outside of Oslo. The centre was closed in 2018. Bjørnebekk was a former centre for alcohol and drug use rehabilitation, located between agricultural lands and a small enclave of residential land. The reception centre is located outside of the municipal centre of Ås. Although a bus passes Bjørnebekk every hour and provides a connection to the town centre, it does so under restricted hours; there is no bus in the middle of the day or in the evening. The one-way ticket fare is 33 NOK, and an adult in a reception centre in 2017 received an allowance of 25 NOK per day. The ARC is within a 3 kilometre walking and biking distance from the community centre, yet it is clearly not an integrated part of the larger community.

To illustrate the social aspects of an urban location, we chose Torshov, a residential area centrally situated in Oslo. Torshov ARC was located in a densely populated urban district, well connected to bus lines (every 5 to 10 minutes) and within a 2.2 kilometre walking and biking distance from the Oslo central district. The ARC was in a lively neighbourhood close to amenities, parks, and shops. Interestingly, similar to Bjørnebekk, the ARC is a former facility for alcohol and drug use rehabilitation. Torshov was closed down in October 2017.



Figure 2. Ås, Bjørnebekk asylmottak and Oslo, Torshov asylmottak. Photos: Marianne Skjulhaug

THE PLANNING SITE: DOCUMENT STUDY

We have searched documents from the United Nations, the European Union, and the Norwegian government, including the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration, with the aim to understand what regulations and criteria are considered when locating asylum reception centres. The UN global site planning guidelines and camp manuals for reception centres have recently included more explicit location criteria. The overall approach in this guidance is to develop a selection methodology that enhances an ARC as ‘a potential catalyst for neighbourhood-upgrading processes in the host community’. According to the report, ‘optimizing solutions that are mutually beneficial for the new arrivals and the partner community are opportunities that should not be missed’.²⁹ These explicit positions constitute a forefront that appears to be lacking from both EU and Norwegian governmental regulations and directives.

The EU has several documents referring to the refugees’ situation. The EU Reception Condition Directive aims to ensure a minimum of living standards for asylum seekers in Europe. The directive includes four main essential areas:

- access to housing, food, clothing
- healthcare
- education for minors
- access to employment under certain conditions

All four are implicitly related to geographical location; however, this is not explicitly defined or formulated in the directive. It is first and foremost adequate standards of living that can relate to a location; however, this is mentioned again as a part of building standards and not localization criteria as such.

According to the European Directive 2013/33/EU,³⁰ where housing is provided in kind, it should take one or a combination of the following forms:

- premises used for the purpose of housing applicants during the examination of an application for international protection made at the border or in transit zones;
- accommodation centres which guarantee an adequate standard of living;
- private houses, flats, hotels or other premises adapted for housing applicants.

Moving to the Norwegian context, we find that the Norwegian Planning and Building Act serves as an overall framework that secures a certain quality in the built environment and living conditions for all people living in Norway. In principle, this also secures the living conditions for refugees in ARCs. ARCs are not specified as a particular land-use category in the Planning and Building Act.

Nevertheless, it is in the authentication process of each ARC that we find the actual ability to influence both building standards and location. Several ministries are involved in the processes of running and approving new ARCs. The governmental document 'Rundskriv H-4/15' regulates the overall issues concerning ARCs. For a building to be approved as an ARC, location is viewed mainly as a technical parameter, regarding issues such as infrastructural capacities and inconvenience as a consequence of establishing an ARC. However, the directive explicitly states that neighbours' fear of possible unwanted behavior from refugees cannot be used as an argument to decline an application.

Two other documents also play an important role in the approval processes of ARCs in Norway. The main governmental document³¹ stipulates that reception centres should secure, that basic needs are met, and that a feeling of safety and security are provided.³² The physical regulations are thus primarily directed towards the physical condition and technical quality of the buildings. Location is not mentioned as a criterion. Nevertheless, the governmental Document-ID: RS 2008-054³³ implicitly points towards the question of location. This is where we find the term *nærmiljø* in use. The document includes documentation on interaction between the local community (*nærmiljø*) and the reception centre. Requirements for a suitable neighbourhood to host an ARC is, however, not explicitly defined. The document requires good communication and interaction between people working at the ARC, refugees, and the host community. It also promotes principles of non-discrimination and respect for otherness. All of these requirements and responsibilities are primarily directed towards the ARC.

THE PUBLIC DISCOURSE SITE: MEDIA STUDY

Our media study examines how ARCs in Norway were presented and represented in Norwegian national and local legacy media in the period from February 2015 to February 2016. The study was conducted as a triangulation of basic quantitative content analysis, supplemented by qualitative analysis of selected news entries. This part of the study tries to answer the following research questions:

- How many news articles (paper and online) talk explicitly about ARCs?
- How are the ARCs represented visually and verbally?
- How are the asylum seekers positioned to their physical urban surroundings?
- What can this tell us about dominant discourses and stereotypes concerning asylum seekers and their needs?

The first sample consisted of more than 20,000 entries, a number that is beyond the scope of this study to analyse in detail. Some initial general findings are nevertheless presented and illustrated below.

First, the coverage based on the word *asylmottak* (ARC in Norwegian) retrieved 24,400 entries in the research period and peaked in November 2015 (see Figure 3). This corresponds with the arrival of asylum seekers largely exceeding the number the authorities had planned for, especially because a large number of people started entering Norway over its northern border with Russia. This situation was largely referred to as a ‘refugee crisis’ in political and popular discourse, as clearly seen in the media.

The data includes both online and paper editions of both local and national media outlets and is derived from the Retriever database where most (although not all) media submit their stories. Adjusted for some instances of foreign coverage, the final number of entries ended up at a total of 22,987 entries, some of which are more or less duplicates in both the paper and online versions.

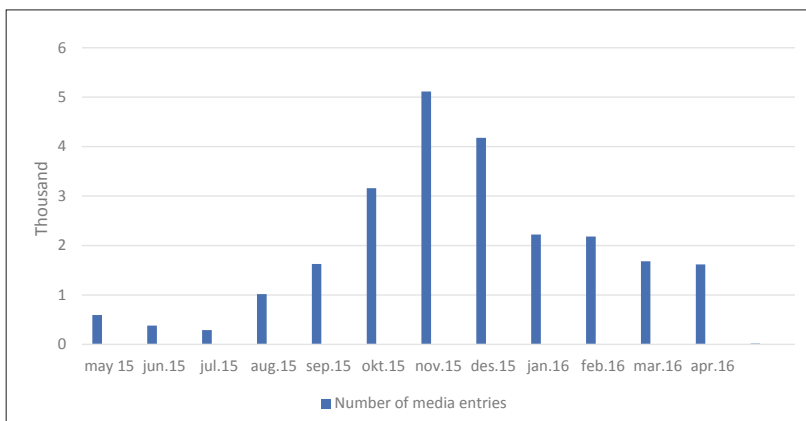


Figure 3. The distribution of 24,080 media entries that included the word *asylmottak* (ARC) in the research period from 1 May 2015 to 1 May 2016. The peak represents November 2015. Source: Retriever

We suspected that there might be some interesting differences between the national and the local media entries. To narrow down this huge amount of material, we first tried to see if there was any correlation between the number of ARCs in a county and the number of media entries. To do so, we had to omit the web entries and concentrate only on the paper editions, since the database is more accurate where the paper version is concerned. The media material indicates that there was no correlation between the number of ARCs in a county and the number of media entries. The newspaper material consisted of almost 10,000 entries from newspapers, a little less than the total. Of these, local media published 64 per cent and national media 15 per cent. Regional media accounted for another 12 per cent. The rest was divided between magazines, specialized media, and the Norwegian news agency NTB.³⁴

We also did a rudimentary content analysis of the full media material, searching for words we would expect to indicate location as a topic. We found that location was rarely the main topic. Only 266 entries mention the word 'location' in relation to ARCs. The term *nærmiljø* was found 133 times, and a professional term like 'quality of living' (*bokvalitet*) came out with only 50 hits. Words like 'home' and 'local community' gave better results. 1,531 articles mention 'home' in relation to ARCs and 1,272 mention 'local community'.

The overall finding was thus that the media seldom focused explicitly on aspects of the location from an ARC and not neighbourhood perspective. A term like 'quality of living' appeared almost exclusively in specialized media, such as architecture magazines, or when specialists in either architecture or planning were interviewed as sources.

We also did some qualitative readings of the 266 entries that did mention the location. One major finding in the material was that the social agency of buildings and their location was seldom explicitly mentioned or discussed, apart from a few that mentioned poor building standards. One example talks about a pregnant woman and a sick child that was offered nothing but simple mattresses in a bomb shelter. In articles like this, location plays a role but is not explicitly mentioned. The broader theme is a critical approach to asylum seekers' living conditions, but, complying with the tacit rules for media narratives, the story is case driven and focuses on selected individuals.³⁵

The same can be said for political stories like the one referred to in the introduction where the Minister of Justice expresses his frustration about asylum

seekers wanting better conditions. Several media ran this story where the minister Anders Anundsen is quoted as saying that an ARC is ‘no holiday home’, implying that asylum seekers cannot be choosers when it comes to accommodations. Again, the agency is related to people, not the buildings or their location.

Another typical trait is that ARCs which have not yet been established receive more attention than those that are ‘facts on the ground’. In relation to planned ARCs, the media analyses provide insight into issues like whether or not, and on what grounds, an ARC is wanted in the community, how the local community will be affected, and what kind of localization is wanted/unwanted. An editorial from the local newspaper *Drammens Tidende* is a case in point. In the article ‘Frykt og avsky i Lier’ (Fear and Loathing in Lier), the political editor discusses negative reactions in the local community when presented with plans to establish an ARC for minors.³⁶

We have found that such cases are not necessarily given a lot of editorial attention; it is generally local voices airing their frustration in the comments sections. One exception to this is a full reportage from a former hotel in a small village, focusing on how a local couple reacted with fear and anger when they realized that their newly bought luxurious apartment had become co-located with an ARC, since the hotel owner had put his facilities at the disposal of local authorities.

In the news sections, we mainly find stories about fires (whether arson or accidents) or criminal activities that generate a certain mention of location, but again, location is seldom explicitly discussed.

URBAN OR PERI-URBAN: LIVED EXPERIENCES

To further nuance our findings, we also visited and talked to people living in two ARCs, one central-urban and one peri-urban, although not the same ARCs as we used in the examples above. Both the ARCs and the people interviewed have been anonymized.

What we found was that people in both the central-urban and the peri-urban examples highlighted accessibility to their surroundings as a major quality. In both ARCs, they were concerned about the ARC being well run, that the ARC itself provided a safe and socially welcoming environment, and that people in their immediate surroundings or community were friendly and courteous.

In the central ARC, people expressed happiness with the proximity to almost anything. 'It makes you feel part of society, and people can learn about Norway just by watching people in the streets,' one informant said. In the peri-urban ARC, some of the inhabitants were psychologically vulnerable. For this group, the non-urban location served as protection against society's demands and challenges, for example, drugs and petty criminal activity. For other inhabitants, the remoteness was experienced as difficult and traumatic, even if they praised the scenery. 'I fled my country for political reasons, and I wish to be an active member of society. In this country, as an asylum seeker, I am not allowed to work, I cannot do anything. I am trapped in the land of waiting, and being so far from everything reminds me of this every day,' one resident stated.

Both of our two selected ARCs are considered successful in terms of having good relations to the community and little to no bad coverage in the media. However, the centrally located ARC has much more daily contact with its neighbours than the peri-urban one. 'Everybody likes us, and wants to help, but it is hard to get non-residents to join us when we arrange something. We are socially quite isolated,' the peri-urban ARC manager complained. In contrast, the centrally located ARC reported that they often arranged activities in collaboration with neighbouring institutions, such as kindergartens, sports teams, artists, and architects. 'It is not the location, but how you choose to use it,' the activity leader in place told us, though still admitting that it helped to be close to relevant collaborating partners.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Various studies confirm that we live in an era of migration, caused by war and environmental degradation. As suggested by Henrik Vigh, there is a good reason to prepare for crisis as the new normal,³⁷ not primarily as a response to migration as such, but because climate-related issues, digital technologies, and the globalization of culture and economy have disruptive effects on people's sense of stability. Migration represents a key challenge to most modern urban societies, and we predict that restrictive migration policies will not remove the need for new ideas, solutions, and approaches to how we receive asylum seekers for shorter or longer periods of time, as well as studies of how cities and regions can be part of the answer to this challenge. Our study suggests that Norway aligns to a pattern found in several other European countries regarding the accommodation of refugees. As pointed out by Klaudia Mierswa, ARCs are often, even if not necessarily deliberately, established at the fringes of urban society.³⁸ While Mierswa's study points to

the social consequences of remote placement, our interdisciplinary approach shows that aspects of ARC locations in peri-urban areas are barely recognized or problematized at all. Governmental regulations do not explicitly include location as a criterion; as mentioned above, the term *nærmiljø* is used as an essential term in UDI's directives for the approval of asylum reception centres. Paradoxically, a large proportion of the ARC locations cannot be defined as part of a proper *nærmiljø*.

Othring has obvious spatial implications on several levels. It reflects popular and often toxic notions of who belongs where, but also physical power structures built into the urban landscape. A peri-urban location pattern represents a symbolic and a physical marginalization, geographically constituting asylum seekers as society's others. However, location is in itself not articulated in the negotiation of the power aspects related to Norwegian migration politics. The regulating documents mention location only vaguely, and location-related issues mostly pass under the journalists' radar. Also, as the Minister of Justice's reaction to complaints from discontented asylum seekers shows, the asylum seekers themselves are expected to be silently grateful and accepting.

In our view, it is a dilemma that ARCs are not from the outset considered permanent parts of the *nærmiljø* in which they are located. We suggest that ARCs can, in fact, be permanent structures with temporary residents, but with permanent institutional ties to its social surroundings. This indicates that a focus on migration highlights relations between place and inhabitation that supplement architectural or urban planning readings of *nærmiljø* as 'grounded' and inherently static. We find that the peri-urban, which in theoretical discourse is largely perceived through its lack of 'public sphere', as well as scattered and uncoordinated land use, also seems to perform as a flexible receptor of suddenly emerging or urgent social programs such as ARCs. The question is then how this flexibility, which seems to run counter to prevailing notions of local community (*nærmiljø*), can be conceptualized in new and constructive ways. We therefore suggest further exploration of interdisciplinary methods as a means of arriving at new approaches emphasizing location as a key to accommodate asylum seekers.

NOTES

¹ Torgeir Hågøy, 'Kan hva som helst benyttes som asylmottak?', *Estate Vest*, 10 November 2015, <https://www.estatevest.no/hvilke-bygg-kan-benytted-til-asylmottak/> (all URLs accessed in May 2019).

² Åshild Lappegard Hauge, Karine Denizou, and Eli Støa, *Bokvalitet på norske asylmottak: Case-studier* (Oslo: SINTEF akademisk forlag, 2015).

³ 'Hvem og hvor mange søkte om beskyttelse i 2016?', UDI statistics, <https://www.udi.no/statistikk-og-analyse/arsrapporter/tall-og-fakta-2016/faktaskriv-2016/hvor-mange-sokte-om-beskyttelse/>.

⁴ Torun Støbakk, 'Anundsen om asylprotest: Mottaket er ikke noe feriested', *Dagbladet*, 8 November 2015.

⁵ Hauge et al., *Bokvalitet på norske asylmottak*.

⁶ Document-ID: RS 2008-054.

⁷ Hauge et al., *Bokvalitet på norske asylmottak*; Nerina Weiss, Anne Britt Djuve, Wendy Hame-link, and Huafeng Zhang, *Opphold i asylmottak: Konsekvenser for levkår og integrering*, Fafo-rapport 2017:07, <http://www.faf.no/images/pub/2017/20615.pdf>; Neil Quinn, 'Participatory Action Research with Asylum Seekers and Refugees Experiencing Stigma and Discrimination: The Experience from Scotland', *Disability & Society* 29, no. 1 (2013), pp. 58–70.

⁸ Weiss et al., *Opphold i asylmottak*.

⁹ Marianne Gullestad, *Livsstil og likhet: Om nærmiljø i byer* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1986).

¹⁰ Wenche Terjesen and Inger Ullern, *Bo i glade grender* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1973).

¹¹ *Program for Områdeløft* refers to communities and neighbourhoods with a minimum of 3,000 inhabitants. In a Norwegian context, this is a substantial number for many municipalities and small communities. See Guro Voss Gabrielsen, 'Groruddalen: Oslos vakreste verkebyll?' (PhD thesis, Oslo School of Architecture and Design, Oslo, 2014); Husbanken, Program for Områdeløft, 2014, INTA conference, 2017, <https://inta-aivn.org/en/communities-of-competence/habitat/migrations/migrations-home>.

¹² Gullestad, *Livsstil og likhet*.

¹³ Sigrun Kaul, *Nærmiljø og nærmiljøverdier: Forsøk på en definisjon* (Oslo: NIBR, 1982); Gullestad, *Livsstil og likhet*; Dag Østerberg, *Arkitektur og sosiologi i Oslo: En sosio-materiell fortolkning* (Oslo: Pax Forlag, 1998); Per Morten Schiefloe, *Nærmiljø i bysamfunn* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1985).

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', trans. Jay Miskowicz, from 'Des Espace Autres', *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (October 1984); David Grahame Shane, *Urban Design since 1945: A Global Perspective* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2011); Klaudia Mierswa, *Reception Conditions of Asylum Seekers in the European Union: Is the EU Fulfilling Its Obligations?*, conference proceedings of the ISA HR NYC Conference Human Rights in an Age of Ambiguity (New York: Fordham University, 2016).

¹⁵ Mierswa, *Reception Conditions of Asylum Seekers in the European Union*.

¹⁶ Alan Berger, Joel Kotkin, and Celina Balderas Guzman, eds., *Infinite Suburbia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 2017); Mattias Qvistrom, *Peri-Urban Landscapes: From Disorder to Hybridity*, in the series *The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies* (London: Routledge, 2012); David Simon, 'Urban Environments: Issues on the Peri-Urban Fringe' *The Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 33 (2008).

¹⁷ Berger et al., *Infinite Suburbia*; Thomas Sieverts, *Cities without Cities: An Interpretation of the Zwischenstadt* (Hoboken: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁸ Sieverts, *Cities without Cities*.

¹⁹ International Urban Development Association, Conference Call 2017, <https://inta-aivn.org/en/communities-of-competence/habitat/migrations/migrations-home>.

²⁰ Hauge et al., *Bokvalitet på norske asylmottak*.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Shane, *Urban Design since 1945*, p. 14.

²³ Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces'.

²⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

²⁵ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013).

²⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 59 (italics in the original).

²⁷ Hilde Lidén, Marianne Lien, and Halvard Vike, eds., *Likhetens paradokser: Antropologiske undersøkelser i det moderne Norge* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2001).

²⁸ Mierswa, *Reception Conditions of Asylum Seekers in the European Union*.

²⁹ Ibid. See also Håvard Breivik and Tone Selmer-Olsen, eds., *Transit: Architectural Solutions in Emergencies* (Oslo: AHO, 2016).

³⁰ 'Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council', <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013L0033&from=EN>.³¹ Document-ID: RS 2008-031.

³² In Norwegian, the document reads: 'Ordinære mottak skal være et nøkternt, men forsvarlig innkvarteringstilbud som sikrer beboernes grunnleggende behov og den enkeltes behov for trygghet' (Document-ID: RS 2008-031).

³³ Title in Norwegian: 'Krav til samarbeid med lokale instanser' (Document-ID: RS 2008-054).

³⁴ The numbers have not been adjusted for articles published both in the paper and the online edition, but it seems probable that even if the number of original articles is lower than these figures indicate, the relation between the categories still holds.

³⁵ For example, Brynjulf Handgaard, Anne Hege Simonsen, and Steen Steensen, *Journalistikk: En innføring* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2013).

³⁶ Karianne Braathen, 'Frykt og avsky i Lier', *Drammens Tidende*, 12 April 2016.

³⁷ Henrik Vigh, 'Crisis and Chronicity: Anthropological Perspectives on Continuous Conflict and Decline', *Ethnos* 73, no. 1 (2008), pp. 5–24.

³⁸ Mierswa, *Reception Conditions of Asylum Seekers in the European Union*.

