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The Grandhotel Cosmopolis – a concrete utopia? Reflections on the mediated and lived geographies of asylum accommodation

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Abstract

This paper argues that perceptions towards asylum seekers are shaped by both media representation as well as lived experiences in and around asylum accommodation. Drawing on Lefebvre's spatial triad, the paper aims at disentangling the conceived, perceived and lived spaces of asylum accommodation in order to understand asylum accommodation as a space that is produced and re-produced in everyday life. The paper discusses the case of the Grandhotel Cosmopolis (GHC), a prominent example of local innovation in asylum accommodation located in southern Germany. It compares and contrasts the GHC' media representation in national and local news media with local residents' evaluation and direct experiences with this project and its effects on how asylum seekers are perceived. The results of the media analysis highlight a difference between a national 'utopian' framing and a local 'experiment' framing of the GHC. Local residents' direct experiences proved influential in their evaluation of the project, yet could not overrule dominant media representations of asylum seekers. The paper concludes by suggesting that the GHC' relative openness produces a space which allows for contact and familiarization between local residents and asylum seekers, yet that dominant framings of asylum seekers as criminals or victims also contributed to a perceived closedness of its space and discouraged contact and familiarization.

Keywords: Asylum accommodation, local innovation, degrees of openness, familiarization, conceived space, lived space, Lefebvre, utopia

Introduction

"The Grandhotel Cosmopolis is a concrete utopia – realizing a cosmopolitan every-day culture without limits where refugees, travellers, guests, artists and neighbours meet and are welcome." (Grandhotel Cosmopolis, 2014, p. 2).

The Grandhotel Cosmopolis (GHC) opened its doors in 2013 and is a combination of hotel, asylum centre, café, restaurant and artistic space located in the inner-city of

Augsburg, Germany. What is unique about the project is that it plays with the image of the grand hotels popular during the turn of the twentieth century, spaces that were associated with comfort and high standards for its guests. By housing asylum seekers in a more open way, the project aims "to take a stance against an institution that is seen as a burden" (Heber, Adamczyk, & Kochs, 2011). It is not only heralded as unique, it is also one of the most famous examples of local innovation in asylum seeker accommodation in Germany and was featured in all major German newspapers and national television programs. In short, the GHC exists not only as a 'real' space, but just as much a mediated and mental space. The case studies of innovation in asylum seeker reception presented in this special issue demonstrate that the GHC is only one among many alternative practices emerging at the local level. Across Europe, civil society organizations and actors are at the forefront of local innovation (Ambrosini & Boccagni, 2015), seeking to provide higher quality living standards than state or for-profit asylum accommodation (Rosenberger & König, 2011) and aim to combat prejudice against asylum seekers by providing higher standards and spaces for contact and familiarization.

Media representation of asylum seekers is held to be a key factor regarding local residents' reactions towards asylum accommodation. A recent review of European media discourse on immigration finds that "while migrant groups are generally underrepresented, when they are present in the media, they are often framed as either economic, cultural, or criminal threats and thus covered in a highly unfavourable way" (Eberl et al., 2018, p. 217). Only few studies focus on media representation of asylum accommodation; among these, Hubbard (2005) and Garner (2013) identified how opponents of asylum accommodation construct rural areas as exclusively white spaces within local media, while portraying asylum seekers as deviant and 'non-belonging'. This lack of attention on how asylum seeker and refugee accommodation is represented in the media is surprising, as space is key to constructions of the self and the other and associated processes of categorization and de-categorization (Dixon, 1997; Probyn, 2003). This article addresses the question of how media representation of a specific example of local innovation in asylum accommodation compares and contrasts with local residents' perceptions and direct experiences and to what extent it contributes to contact and familiarization.

Given that the central concern of this paper is local residents' perceptions of and lived experiences with asylum accommodation, asylum seekers' experiences of the GHC are featured in an upcoming publication. The paper is organized as follows: After situating the paper within debates on asylum seekers' media representation, the paper provides an overview of the methodological approach and a short description of the GHC and the German asylum system. The following three sections discuss the empirical findings, starting with the media analysis which highlights a contrast between a national utopian framing, a local experiment framing of the GHC and the project's self-description as a concrete utopia. This is followed by a discussion on how media representation compares and contrasts with local residents' knowledge and direct experiences of the GHC. Thereafter, the paper discusses the role of openness and closedness of asylum accommodation and how this can be read as a social and physical production of space which helps shift media representation in favour of individual, direct experiences. The conclusion reflects on the interrelatedness of conceived, perceived and lived spaces of asylum and their implications for innovation and familiarization at a local level.

The mediated and lived geographies of asylum accommodation

Several studies on local residents' reactions towards asylum seeker reception and accommodation seek to explain the individual or contextual factors behind objections. Using quantitative approaches, these studies found that socio-demographic factors such as level of education or income play an important role in shaping perceptions and attitudes (Bolt & Wetsteijn, 2018; Lubbers, Coenders, & Scheepers, 2006; Zorlu, 2017). There is also significant spatial variation in attitudes which are found to differ between urban and rural areas and even between neighbourhoods (Crawley, Drinkwater, & Kausar, 2019; Friedrichs, Leßke, & Schwarzenberg, 2019; Gregurović, Radeljak Kaufmann, Župarić-Iljić, & Dujmović, 2019). An important contribution is Lubbers et al.'s (2006) study, as they show that attitudes towards asylum accommodation also vary between the size of centres. Most of these studies find a positive correlation between personal contacts with asylum seekers and positive attitudes, thereby supporting the so-called 'contact hypothesis' (Allport, 1954). However, these studies provide only limited insight into the kinds of spatial and place-based factors shaping perceptions and attitudes.

Qualitative studies on locals' reactions towards asylum accommodation provide more nuanced insight into the formation of attitudes, showing how political, socio-economic and historical place-based factors influence reactions towards asylum seekers (Bock, 2018). With regard to the temporal dimension, Bygnes (2019) studied attitudes towards the establishment of asylum accommodation in Norway and found changes in local residents' attitudes before and after the establishment of the centres. The author attributes these mood changes to increased physical and geographical proximity to asylum seekers and asylum accommodation. The study also finds that contact and inter-personal interaction can help to correct dominant framings of asylum seekers in the media, yet that these local encounters have little effect on general perceptions towards migration on the national level. With regard to the spreading of information, Blommaert, Dewilde, Stuyck, Peleman, and Meert (2003) posits that spatial proximity to asylum accommodation affects the quality of shared information, as local residents can draw on direct experience. The authors explain that "translocal information is dominant prior to the establishing of the centre; but as soon as the centre is established a local community [...] emerge(s) which can draw upon locally constructed, experiential (direct or derived) information" (Blommaert et al., 2003, p. 325). What these qualitative studies highlight is that attitudes towards asylum accommodation have to be understood in relation to localized, direct experiences and not solely as a product of media representation.

In order to disentangle the imagined and mediatized spaces of asylum accommodation from those that are directly perceived and experienced in everyday life, this paper draws on the work of Lefebvre (1991). In what he terms the 'spatial triad', Lefebvre distinguishes between *'representations of space'* or 'conceived' space, *'representational space'* or 'lived' space and *'spatial practices'* or 'perceived space'. Conceived spaces may be constructed by media images and public discourse and enter individuals' mental spaces, while lived space describes the space of everyday experience and perceptions (Lefebvre, 1991). Spatial practices are "the physical city, its maintenance, redevelopment and the daily routines of everyday life" (Leary, 2009, p. 196). The value of taking a Lefebvrian approach for this case study lies within the emphasis on the *production of space* which turns asylum accommodation into a space that is physically and socially produced and makes societal relations within this process visible that would otherwise

remain hidden (see also Conlon, 2011; Hartmann, 2017; McAllister, 2015; Vuolteenaho & Lyytinen, 2018).

Media discourse can be seen as a part of conceived space, as it frames how we perceive spaces associated 'different' others, such as asylum accommodation. Asylum seekers' media representation exhibits several commonalities across national contexts. One recurring finding is the racialization of asylum seekers in media discourse, frequently falling within a villain, victim or humanitarian frame (Crawley, McMahon, & Jones, 2016; Lynn & Lea, 2003; Pickering, 2001). Framing, according to Entman (1993, p. 52), means "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and to make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation". Chouliaraki and Zaborowski (2017) argue that these frames not only position asylum seekers as ambiguous figures, but also contribute to journalistic practices of symbolic bordering which strengthen both misrecognition and in- or exclusion of asylum seekers. Their study uncovered a strict hierarchy of voice in which politicians' and elite voices were privileged above those of ordinary citizens or migrants' voices and that symbolic bordering is achieved through silencing, collectivization and decontextualization of refugees' voices. Still, media representation of asylum seekers and refugees is far from uniform, as differences have been found for the type of media, between public and commercial media and between national and local news media (D'Haenens, Joris, & Heinderzckx, 2019; De Coninck, Vandenberghe, & Matthijs, 2019). Finney and Robinson (2008) highlight how local news production on asylum and dispersal policy is influenced both by local power structures as well as local place identity and may not conform with national news media.

Important for the overall line of reasoning of this paper is that media discourse is only one among many sources of knowledge creating familiarity with someone or something. Crucially, familiarization and estrangement take place in the everyday, lived spaces of the city and create feelings of closeness or distance between people (Blokland & Nast, 2014; Karakayali, 2009; Koefoed & Simonsen, 2011). Knowledge and direct experience are crucial for familiarization; knowledge is formed by direct sources of information, such as personal experiences, and indirect sources of information, like the media or family and friends. Direct experience consists of collective and individual experiences of difference, aspects of a person's biography and collective or place-based histories of migration (Hickman & Mai, 2015; Phillips & Robinson, 2015; Szytniewski & Spierings, 2014). With regard to the direct experience of encountering strangers, Ahmed (2000) explains that the 'stranger is someone who is *already* known', someone that is then recognized as 'being out of place'. Therefore, strange(r) ness cannot exist outside of encounters with others, but is constructed through them.

Local residents' re-actions towards asylum seeker accommodation are also a question of behaviour and everyday experiences (Blommaert et al., 2003). In this sense, asylum accommodation is more than a material object that is reacted to; asylum accommodation is also a spatial practice that shapes and is shaped by a multitude of local, regional and national actors, by local residents as much as asylum seekers. Perceptions of who does not belong within a spatially demarcated and 'imagined community' contribute to symbolic boundary making processes by enabling or preventing familiarization with 'others' (van Eijk, 2011). Symbolic boundaries between ourselves and others may be unrelated to state bordering practices, yet

as borders increasingly move inward into the everyday (Cassidy, Yuval-Davis, & Wemyss, 2018; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, & Cassidy, 2018), symbolic boundaries may lay the groundwork for bordering practices and debates of who rightfully belongs. Asylum accommodation contributes to practices of symbolic bordering by being legally open, yet perceived and experienced as symbolically closed (Zill, van Liempt, Spierings, & Hooimeijer, 2019).

Methods

The methods used for data collection were media analysis and semi-structured interviews with local residents. While media analysis gives insight into the conceived space of asylum accommodation, semi-structured interviews were used to illuminate local residents' perceptions and affective experiences of asylum accommodation in lived space. National and local news media was analysed by using a combination of qualitative content analysis and media frame analysis (Entman, 1993; Hay, 2010; Hodgetts & Chamberlain, 2014). In order to analyse national news reporting, 'Grandhotel Cosmopolis' was used as a search term in the LexisNexis news databank, resulting in 74 national news items containing a reference. Thirteen full-text articles were selected for in-depth analysis that featured the GHC as its main topic. Local news items were taken from the online archive of the 'Augsburger Allgemeine', the only local print newspaper based in Augsburg. Forty nine articles mentioned the Grandhotel Cosmopolis in the title or subtitle; from these, ten articles were selected that were rich in detail. Both national and local news articles were analysed by using a grid structure, highlighting general themes and changes in themes over time (Hodgetts & Chamberlain, 2014) and coded within MAXQDA.
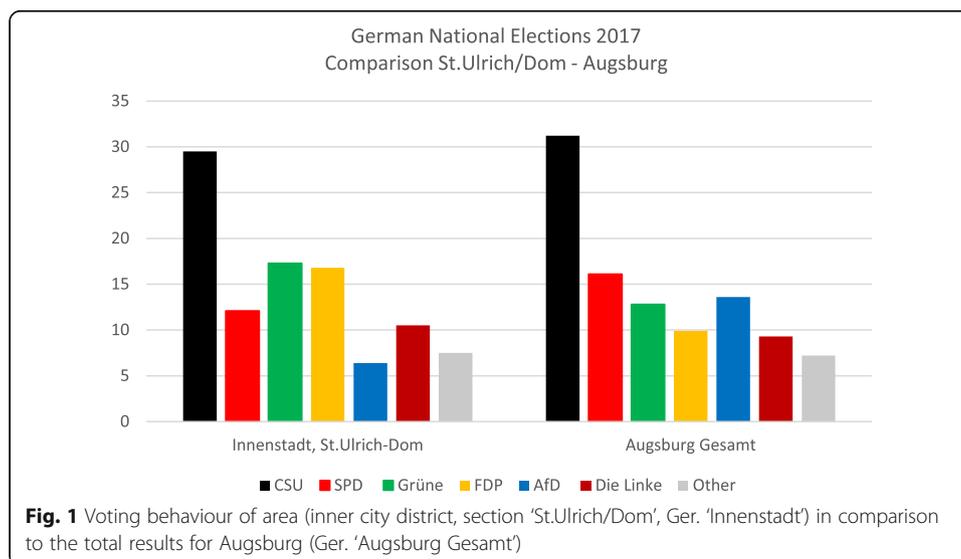
Semi-structured interviews gave insight into the everyday experiences, opinions and beliefs of local residents. Research participants were recruited by employing a mixture of sampling techniques. About 300 leaflets were distributed by hand into the mailboxes of the neighbourhood surrounding the GHC at the start of the research to inform local residents and recruit research participants. Only one person responded directly to the leaflet, two participants were recruited by using the snowballing method and one male resident was recruited directly in the café of the GHC. The majority of respondents was approached directly in neighbouring streets of the GHC at different times of the day. Fourteen interviews with local residents were conducted; the interviews were held in German in a setting of the participant's choice and lasted between 30 min and one and a half hours. Four interviews were conducted in the homes of participants, another four in the café of the GHC and six in cafés of the neighbourhood. After gaining consent from participants, the interviews were recorded, transcribed and anonymized for the purpose of analysis and coded in MAXQDA.

The sample was diverse in age and gender, ranging from 31 to 65 years and consisted of six women and eight men who lived in the neighbourhood surrounding the GHC, not more than a 5 min walking distance away. Interviewees' length of residence in the area varied between several months to more than 20 y. Three interviewees self-identified as having a migratory background; two being from within Europe and one from Latin America. Interviewees' current or past occupations

such as architect or teacher in higher education suggest secondary and tertiary levels of education, which corresponds with the high level of education of the area population and is also reflected in the overall low percentage of unemployed residents in comparison with the city as a whole (2,5% vs 4,2% in 2017) (Augsburg, 2017). None of the interviewees was directly involved as a volunteer within the GHC, only one female resident had participated in a neighbourhood event organized by the GHC. None of the interviewees had reported strong objections towards asylum seekers during the interviews, which is also reflected in the area's voting behaviour in the German National Elections of 2017 (see Fig. 1). This may be explained by the manner of sampling as well as by the polarized nature of public debate on the topic of asylum seeking during the time of fieldwork.

Asylum in Germany and the Grandhotel Cosmopolis

Individuals applying for asylum in Germany are required to stay in reception centers *(Erstaufnahmeeinrichtungen)* for a period of maximum 3 months, thereafter they are dispersed to collective accommodation *(Gemeinschaftsunterkunft)* in which residence is mandatory during the application process (Müller, 2013)*.* Asylum seekers which have received a negative decision on their application *(Duldung)* are also required to stay in collective accommodation centres (Wendel, 2014). Asylum applications are decided on national level by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees *(BAMF)*, while its sixteen federal states *(Länder)* are given the task of organizing asylum seeker reception and accommodation (Leptien, 2013). Upon arrival, asylum seekers are dispersed to one of the sixteen *Länder*, following a quota based on tax revenue and population *(Königssteiner Schlüssel)*. Bavaria receives the second highest percentage of asylum seekers (15%), preceded only by North Rhine-Westphalia (21%). The *Länder* often use a similar dispersal scheme; Bavaria has a fixed quota for the number of asylum seekers dispersed to each of its administrative districts *(Regierungsbezirke, see* Fig. 3) (Müller, 2013)*.* The administrative district of Swabia is responsible for accommodating asylum seekers in Augsburg.

Fig. 1 Voting behaviour of area (inner city district, section 'St.Ulrich/Dom', Ger. 'Innenstadt') in comparison to the total results for Augsburg (Ger. 'Augsburg Gesamt')
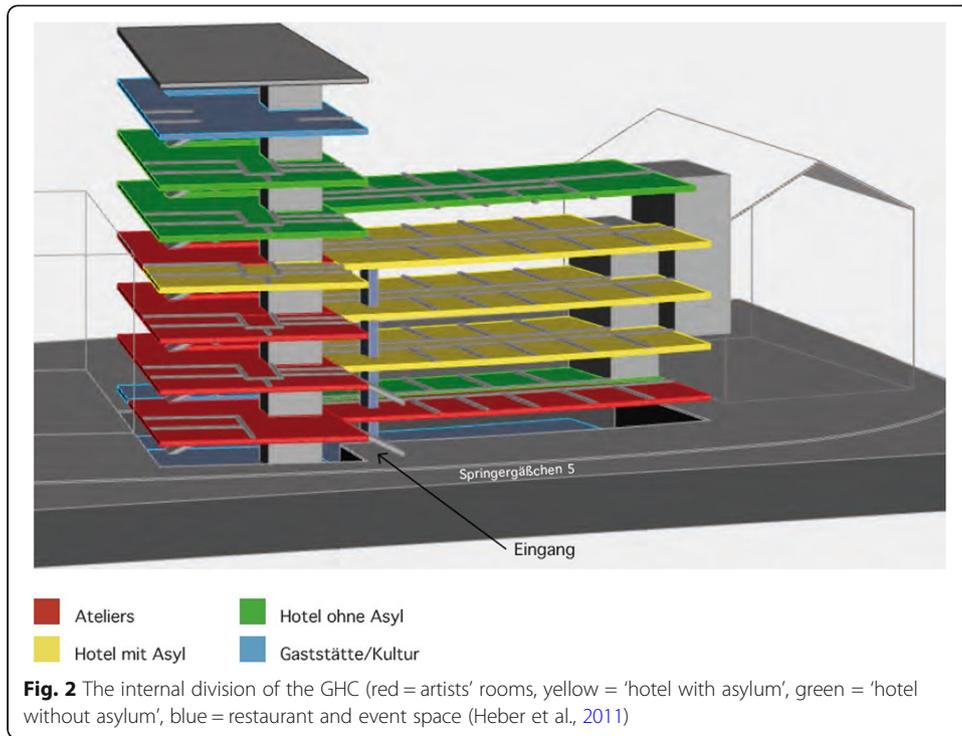
Augsburg lies within the state of Bavaria and has a population of nearly 300.000 inhabitants of which 48% have a migratory background[1] (Augsburg, 2017), making religious and ethnic diversity a feature of everyday life. The relatively high ratio of foreign-born residents and residents with foreign-born parents is largely due to its history of being a popular destination for labour migrants from Turkey, Greece and Italy between the 1960s and 1980s (Haus der Bayerischen Geschichte, 2019). The city has twelve collective accommodation centres that are run by the district administration and house up to 1250 asylum seekers. Their main countries of origin are Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Nigeria.

The GHC was conceived by two local artists and an architect with previous experience in transforming temporarily empty buildings. The building dates back to the 1950s, built as an elderly care home run by a German protestant welfare organization. Artists and activists transformed the previously abandoned building over the course of 1 y, during which they gave public tours and organized events. The first group of asylum seekers arrived in August 2013, in October 2013 the GHC opened for hotel guests. The building has room for 56 asylum seekers, 44 hotel guests and 18 artists' studios (Grandhotel Cosmopolis, 2018; Stadt Augsburg, 2019). The original plan of mixing asylum seekers' and hotel rooms was opposed by the local district administration, leading to a separation of the floors of asylum seekers and hotel guests which are connected by a common staircase (see Fig. 2). The area surrounding the Grandhotel Cosmopolis is part of the inner-city district, with public squares such as the 'Rathausplatz', and has a religious character as the cathedral *(Dom),* the bishop's residence and church-related care facilities are located there (see Fig. 3).

National utopia or local experiment? The Grandhotel Cosmopolis' representation in news media

Asylum accommodation operates as a conceived space through the networked production and circulation of images within and by the media. Representation, space and place intersect in at least two ways in the case of the GHC: Being the subject of multiple news items, it is a 'place-in-media' (Adams, 2011). Not only is the GHC represented in news media, it also intervenes in and reimagines the conceived spaces of asylum accommodation and its inhabitants: What was an asylum centre has become a 'grandhotel', the asylum seeker a cosmopolitan traveller of the world (Grandhotel Cosmopolis, 2014). National and local news items adopt the GHC's terminology within their reporting, such as 'guests with or without asylum', which can be seen as a successful intervention in dominant framings of asylum seekers. The media analysis also demonstrated that there are significant differences between the framing of the GHC in national and local news items. National news items tend to frame the GHC as a 'utopia', while local news items stress its 'model' or 'experimental' character. This difference in national and local framing is particularly prominent in the longest national feature article, describing the project in terms of a 'utopia' and a 'fairy tale':

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[1]'Migratory background' (Ger: Migrationshintergrund) includes naturalized foreign nationals, ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union and children under 18 of foreign nationals (Augsburg, 2017).

Fig. 2 The internal division of the GHC (red = artists' rooms, yellow = 'hotel with asylum', green = 'hotel without asylum', blue = restaurant and event space (Heber et al., 2011)

Fig. 3 Inner-city location of the GHC and Augsburg's location in Bavaria and Germany

> "But is this strange hotel, in which one almost cannot distinguish between guests, artists and refugees, worth more than an applause at an award ceremony? Is it enough to be considered a modern fairy tale?" (DZ, 06.03.2014)

In the excerpt above, the combination of 'utopia' with 'fairy tale' appears as questioning the feasibility of the project by suggesting that the GHC exists outside of reality, rather than being considered an experiment which could contribute to reforming asylum accommodation. This dualism between 'utopia' and 'reality' is especially visible in the opening sentence of the same feature article, as it suggests a conflict between the Hoteliers, characterized as 'megalomaniacs', and state bureaucracy. This conflict is symbolized by 'two names' for the place; with 'GUXV' being the official state-administrative term for the fifteenth collective accommodation facility (Ger. GU = Gemeinschaftsunterkunft).

> "The place has two names. The first one was invented by megalomaniacs: Grandhotel Cosmopolis. [...] The bureaucrats of the Swabian state administration [...] call the place GU XV." (DZ, 06.03.2014)

By contrast, local news items also covered how bureaucratic challenges were overcome and how the GHC contributed to a more humane approach to asylum accommodation and the integration of refugees in Augsburg. One possible explanation for these differences lies in how the selective discussion of topics resonates with the scale and related preferences of its readership; the project's political framing applies more to the national level, while its framing as a space for integration is more salient on the local level, as demonstrated by the following quote:

> "Without the Grandhotel Cosmopolis Augsburg would be missing something important: A bit of humanity [humaneness]. This institution provides refugees with important social contact points, which they would be denied in remote or isolated centres. [...] The makers of the Grandhotel have shown that their ideas are not a pipe dream, but strengthen the 'togetherness' in Augsburg." (AA, 03.11.2018)

How can we interpret these differences in the GHCs' representation as a utopia, a concrete utopia or an experiment? Thomas More conceived utopia as a place of social harmony and stability. To this end, he not only excluded all potentially disturbing factors such as money, private property or wage labour, but also located utopia on an island which is cut off from the outside world (More, Miller, & Harp, 2014). This definition is different from the GHC' conceptualization of utopia as something that is simultaneously concrete and at the same time unachievable (Heber et al., 2011). In being in touch with reality, it matches Lefebvre's (2003) conceptualization, as he argues against interpreting utopia as mere fantasy. Contrary to More's vision of utopia as a place of social harmony, the GHC's interpretation of utopia is in touch with what is perceived to be concrete reality, as well as leaves a door open for imagining an alternative future. While the notion of experiment is closer to the idea of a concrete utopia in that its outcome remains undefined, the designation as experiment lacks an orientation towards and a vision of the future. Hence, while locally the project has opened up possibilities for alternative forms of asylum accommodation, national news items suggest

that the search for alternatives to the current governance of asylum accommodation are nothing but mere 'fairy-tales'.

It appears therefore as especially puzzling that it was the national and international level from which the GHC gained significant approval in the form of media interest, prizes and visits from politicians. This national and international recognition of the GHC then made headlines in local media reporting, which locally contributed to the GHC's image of being 'unique' in Germany and having nothing in common with 'normal' asylum accommodation. Its 'out-of-the-ordinariness' is symbolized in descriptions of its interior spaces which illustrate two key assumptions: First, the material standards of asylum seekers and hotel guests' rooms are reported to be similar, suggesting a level of equality between asylum seekers and hotel guests which makes *'encounters on eye-level'* possible. More, asylum seekers' rooms are said to contrast with *"the often neglected rooms in asylum centres" (AA, 22.04.2013).* Second, a 'unique mixture' is assumed, where all its residents are physically and symbolically united 'under one roof'. This symbolic unity further contributes to the image of harmonious and equal relations between asylum seekers and other residents, while it also suggests that social distance can be overcome by bringing asylum seekers into close spatial proximity with artists and other 'travellers'.

The media analysis also shows that the GHC had already received national recognition before the first asylum seekers had moved in. This suggests that asylum seekers' lived experiences of the project are considered to be secondary to its unique concept and image. An indication of this is that it was only in 2015, 2 y after asylum seekers had moved in, that a local news item featured the experiences of an asylum seeker, a Chechen family father living in the GHC and his reasons for seeking asylum. When he is quoted directly, the GHC is described as a 'home', 'paradise' or 'family', supporting the already established utopian image of the project. The lack of diverse representations of asylum seekers' experiences in the media has already been highlighted by authors such as Crawley et al. (2016), whose research suggests that migrant voices are more likely to be included in positive stories in order to support the general narrative, rather than present a new perspective. In this way, the GHC's utopian framing resembles what is called 'degenerate utopias', which are characterized by an exclusion of difference. According to Harvey (2000), the danger of this depiction lies in the fact that degenerate utopias have lost their capacity for societal critique. Imagined as a culturally and ethnically homogeneous place, the social order of these utopias were held in position by hierarchical forms of authority and do not allow for difference or deviation from any norm.

Another striking finding from the media analysis is the assumption that deportations of asylum seekers represent a break or failure of the GHC utopian image: *"The social sculpture is crumbling" (DZ, 06.03.2014)* and *"The perfect success story is experiencing its sad rupture" (AA, 08.04.2015).* According to this interpretation, deportations shatter the image of utopia as a place of social harmony. Yet does the issue of deportation also shatter the GHC's self-description as a concrete utopia? Not necessarily, as utopias that aim for political critique are meant to be 'unsettling' or discomforting (Kraftl, 2007). While national news items did not feature protests of activists against deportation, nor any affected individuals, local news media depicted deportations as a local issue, reporting on the dire consequences this had on particular individuals and families. Therefore, rather than being an abstract, place-less process, local news reporting on deportation fulfils the purpose of a concrete utopia of offering political critique; even more so as

deportations in state-run asylum centres remain mostly unreported. Its unsettling effect is captured in the title of a local news item: *"Refugees' fates come close [hautnah]"* (AA, 26.10.2013), the term *'hautnah'* translating literally as 'skin-close'. The GHC local media representation thus bridges the perceived social distance between asylum seekers and local residents, as asylum seekers' representations changed from being a categoric label to being a particular person. The following section analyses to what extent local residents knowledge of the GHC influences familiarization with asylum seekers.

Beyond media representation: The role of direct experience for familiarization with the GHC

In contrast to the GHC' media representation, local residents described their initial reactions as not unanimously positive. Richard, a direct neighbour of the GHC who had bought and renovated a large property several years before the opening of the GHC, reported being afraid that the area could not support another 'special needs group', which he thought would lead to a loss in property value. Max, a long-term resident of the area, was initially sceptical of housing asylum seekers in his neighbourhood, as he drew upon images of a local, large-scale accommodation facility at the edge of town. At several points in the interview he stressed that he viewed asylum seekers' living circumstances to be the actual source of danger; a conclusion he draws based on his personal experience with local facilities. Contrary to media reporting, Richard and Max evaluated the GHC relative to its position in the built environment as well as to its historical position within local experiences of asylum accommodation, which underlines how local political, socio-economic and historical factors influence attitudes towards asylum accommodation (Bock, 2018; Bygnes, 2019; Hinger, 2016). The respondents' statements below exemplify that media representation alone does not determine how a place such as the GHC is perceived; lived experiences is just as influential for the judgements on spaces and places of otherness (Moores, 2017; Silverstone, 2007).

> *"I don't have a problem with these institutions. But I was afraid that more and more **special needs groups [Sondergruppen] collide here**. ... So I thought, okay, **will this work out? Can I rent out my apartment in this atmosphere?"** (Richard, 50, direct neighbour)*

> *"There were examples here in Augsburg, there was **a large container camp** [...] **And I am sure, nobody would have wanted to go there at night.** [...] And I'd say, those kinds of accommodations, you could put anybody there, even a perfectly intact German grown up under the best circumstances, **I am sure, he'd have a social problem** after half a year. [...] **And that's why there's a danger."** (Max, 58, neighbourhood resident)*

Direct experience proved to be a crucial factor in changing local residents' reactions towards the GHC, as it provided for an additional source of knowledge. Direct sources of knowledge that respondents mentioned included knowing volunteers personally or simply walking past the Grandhotel as part of their daily routines. Direct knowledge can add to and even correct knowledge gained from indirect sources of information such as friends or the media. Anna's statement below exemplifies how her residential

proximity to the GHC provided her with direct, lived experience of the area which led her to evaluate the project on the basis of her local knowledge. This finding is similar to Blommaert et al.'s (2003) observation that spatial proximity to asylum accommodation changes the quality of knowledge, as residents can draw from direct experience rather than indirect information alone. Similarly, Bygnes' (2019) research emphasizes the importance of spatial proximity and direct experience in generating local mood changes.

> "I heard [about opening of the GHC] from acquaintances that don't even live in Augsburg. They must have read an article in the newspaper or heard about it on the radio [...]. And she said, ,did you know, just around your corner asylum seekers will move in, poor you! I think you should sell your house.' [...] **But I actually preferred [the GHC] moving into the former elderly care home, because it was empty and ugly for so long... uninhabited. So I didn't see a problem there**, while some of my friends said, this will devalue the neighbourhood." (Anna, 57)

However, the GHC' media representation proved to be a double-edged sword for local residents' evaluation of the project. While most local residents identified a positive influence of national media reporting on local attitudes towards and identification with the GHC, others reported to have been sceptical of the 'overly positive' media reporting and its utopian portrayal of the GHC. For instance, Max thought that the media's desire for a success story masked internal conflicts. Eventually, he changed his opinion as he stated that the GHC's representation as a nationally praised model ensured that problems were dealt with and implied a pre-selection of 'less problematic' asylum seekers. To him, the project's success does not necessarily derive from improved living conditions for asylum seekers, but from public pressure to turn the project into a 'success story'. Max bases his interpretation of the news media on his personal and professional experiences, underlining the importance of direct experience within reactions towards asylum accommodation.

> "At some point I thought it was a positive thing that it was going to be a model project, because more attention will be paid to its social impacts. **You don't want a model project to fail**, because of... well, some social problems. [...] **And by it being a model project, I had the hope that the most problematic asylum cases would not be concentrated there**, like in some industrial area in some containers, with many dissatisfied young men that don't know what to do with themselves." (Max, 58, neighbourhood resident)

An important part of local residents' direct experience was being able to observe the GHC on a daily basis. Several respondents, such as Richard, explained that this contributed to the project being perceived as a 'normal' part of the neighbourhood:

> "Neighbours more or less learned that it [the Grandhotel] works well, [...] **it's not chaotic** or anything. [...] People see that, well, some people just look different than other Augsburgers and that was it. [...] We also don't experience this hype of it being special. **For us, it is completely normal**." (Richard, 50, direct neighbour)

Jutta, a direct neighbour who had moved in shortly before the opening of the GHC, noted that its comparatively small size also made it possible for her to notice the absence of certain individuals, highlighting the importance of recognition in the process of familiarizing with others. As the following quote illustrates, the small scale of GHC makes it possible to go beyond categorical recognition of asylum seekers, that is, recognition based on ethnicity, religion or other group membership. Thereby, small scale asylum accommodation enables individual recognition, meaning being able to place someone by knowing who they are (Lofland, 1973). Differences in individual or categorical recognition might provide an explanation for Lubbers et al.'s (2006) finding that objections against centres correlates with the size of the centre.

> "We are not confronted with misery, but **a well-functioning [project].** With the same people that calling for lunch, the same people repairing bikes, the same children playing outside. […] It is not problematic at all, but perhaps that is deceiving as well. Because there is an underlying problem. **But … we don't see it that way.**" (Jutta, 48, direct neighbour)

Just walk in? Differences in perceived open- and closedness of asylum accommodation

Direct experience is central to the concept of the GHC; its café is not only physically open seven days a week, it also signalizes openness through its material objects, such as a welcome sign and the red carpet at the main entrance. By appealing to the affectual rather than the cognitive element of familiarization, the GHC builds on the idea that familiarization is not only dependent on 'what', but just as much on 'how', 'where' and 'when' we know. By encouraging passers-by to 'walk in!', the GHC ultimately enables local residents to contrast media representation with their own direct experience of the place. Several interviewees appreciated the café as one of the neighbourhoods' few semi-public spaces and held its openness to be its main difference with standard asylum centres. As Jutta explained, asylum seekers may live in spatial proximity to locals, yet this spatial proximity is mediated by differences in open- or closedness of asylum accommodation. Being able to enter an asylum centre influences locals' perceptions of this space, as isolation is experienced as a relational process between individuals or groups. The GHC's openness is therefore not so much a static feature, but can be interpreted as a conscious and ongoing engagement with space and processes of symbolic boundary-making.

> "Yes, it makes a difference [that the Grandhotel has a café]. **Because it signals, come in, we are open for everyone**, I think that is a really important symbol. Because, I think if you walk past and you see, other people are living there now, that is really **different if people have the possibility to go there, to go inside**, order a coffee … it makes a difference. **It's not so isolated.**" (Jutta, 48, direct neighbour)

It is therefore unsurprising that respondents perceived standard asylum accommodation as having higher degrees of closedness, which resulted from their assumptions of privacy or presence of authority in asylum accommodation. Several interviewees argued that their private and institutional character meant it was 'none of their business' to

enter asylum accommodation as the state was responsible for care. Silke assumed that it would be easier for her to offer help if she shared a building with asylum seekers. Her statement below suggests that relative closeness of asylum accommodation is just as much a matter of perception and experience as much as it is of security or locked doors; her acknowledgement of 'I wouldn't go in' is an expression of affect, of a feeling of discomfort which prevents her from directly experiencing the inside of such spaces.

> *"Because somehow, if asylum seekers are in a centre, you think that, well, **someone else is responsible**, like the municipality or the state. Whereas in a private flat it's easier to get in contact, because it is just one family. **And in a centre, if I'm honest, I wouldn't go in**." (Silke, 63, neighbourhood resident)*

Hence, standard asylum accommodation discourages individuals from active engagement with these places. The absence of spatial practice for local residents results in stark contrast between media representation and lived experience, as what is already known about asylum accommodation through the media cannot be evaluated through direct interaction with a place. Borrowing from Ahmed (2000), the space of the asylum centre is 'familiar in its strange(r)ness'; we already 'know' this space, yet we cannot experience *this space* as a *particular* place.

However, the possibility of entering the GHC and gaining direct experience did not necessarily change interviewees' overall perceptions of asylum seekers. Frieda, a long-term neighbourhood resident in her early fifties, thought that mixing different kinds of residents meant that asylum seekers are taken care of. She reported to visit the café on a regular basis and holds the GHC to be preferable to standard forms of accommodation, which she associates with violence:

> *"Sometimes I go into the [café] and have a coffee, and it is always cheerful, easygoing and mixed. And there is no difference between rich and poor, black or white or yellow, **it is mixed like a beautiful colourful bubble**. For me, it's only positive. **And they also take care that nothing happens there, they protect the people there**. […] And it is certainly not comparable with those wooden barracks, **that they trigger violent behaviour, that's obvious**." (Frieda, 52, neighbourhood resident)*

While both national and local media depicted the GHC as a place that generates a sense of equality among its different residents and users, interviewees such as Frieda interpreted the GHC' internal mixture as a form of care and control. Other interviewees suggested that the presence of artists, activists and other users reduced the likelihood of violence to occur as to them, mixture increases neighbourhood safety by ensuring social control, thereby *"defusing"* a potentially *"explosive"* situation. Perceptions of the GHC as a place that provides both care and control implicitly draws upon dominant frames of migrants as either victims or criminals (Crawley et al., 2016). This indicates that the possibility of directly experiencing asylum accommodation may dispel initial doubts or fears, dominant frames of asylum seekers are hard to overcome. Still, it could also be argued that a sense of control achieved through residential mixture might be preferable to control achieved through securitization.

Dominant media frames of asylum seekers as criminals or victims may also prevent local residents from entering spaces such as the GHC or from seeking inter-personal contact with asylum seekers. Christa's statement below illustrates that while she considers the GHC's openness a crucial factor in facilitating contact and familiarization, not everyone is willing to engage in contact and familiarization. Similarly, framing asylum seekers as victims may also prevent inter-personal interaction, as contact with asylum seekers is perceived to be a moral responsibility rather than a casual encounter. Higher degrees of openness of asylum accommodation can therefore only provide opportunities for 'meaningful encounters' (Valentine, 2008), their actual occurrence depends not on chance but on choice.

> "I also sent people there, I said, just take a look. They are curious and they said, it was great and some even volunteer there now. […] **It's great that its so open. Because otherwise, people would have no contact at all.** [But] I wouldn't recommend it to everyone. […] And with the asylum seekers, sometimes there is a bit of hostility against them. […] **I once told someone, and he really said to me, 'no, I will not have coffee next to a 'nigger''. And then I thought, oh, you have to be careful, not everybody likes it.**" (Christa, 49, neighbourhood resident)

Conclusion

This paper argues that local attitudes towards asylum seekers are shaped by media representation as well as lived experiences. Lefebvre's (1991) distinction between a 'conceived', 'perceived' and 'lived space' provides a valuable framework for understanding how media representation and direct experiences of asylum accommodation intersect and shape attitudes towards asylum seekers. The paper examined the case of the GHC, a prominent example of local innovation in asylum accommodation in Augsburg, Germany. It compares the GHC' representation in national and local news media with local residents' evaluation and their direct experiences of the project. This resulted in three main findings: First, the media analysis revealed a contrast between a utopian frame in national news items, an experiment frame in local news items and the GHC own terminology of being a 'concrete utopia'. While a concrete utopia is both a critique of the present as well as a vision of an alternative politics of asylum accommodation, a 'utopia' frame suggests a place of social harmony and has lost its potential for political critique.

Second, interviews with local residents demonstrated that direct, place-based and affective experiences influence individual attitudes towards asylum accommodation. However, dominant frames of asylum seekers as criminals or victims remained influential and in some cases shaped or even prevented everyday interaction, demonstrating that physical proximity to asylum seekers alone only has a limited effect on attitudes. Third, the relative 'openness' of the GHC encouraged some local residents to enter, engage with and produce its space. However, dominant media frames of asylum seekers can also discourage or prevent local residents from engaging with such spaces, thereby strengthening symbolic boundaries and everyday bordering processes. The findings demonstrate the value of more nuanced and long-term analyses of reactions towards asylum accommodation and the influence of media representation and direct experience within this process.

An important, yet often overlooked factor shaping local residents' reactions is the space of the asylum centre itself, not only as a material or physical object, but as an on-going process

or 'spatial practice'. Who is involved in or excluded from this process of spatial production is an expression of political power (see Darling, 2011). Asylum accommodation is actively produced and reproduced in everyday life by media and policy documents, within individuals' minds and behaviour as well as within everyday spaces. Representation, knowledge and lived experience of asylum accommodation are deeply connected to the governance of asylum accommodation and therefore necessitate analyses that think perceived, conceived and lived spaces together.

In short, media representation of innovative projects does not simply reflect reality, it also shapes and is shaped by reality. The way in which innovative projects are framed, especially in national debate, may influence perceptions on up-scaling local innovation. Framing projects such as the GHC as a 'utopia' or a 'concrete utopia' is significant, as the difference in meaning determines to what extent we perceive such projects as a critique on and an alternative to the current governance of asylum accommodation. By suggesting social harmony, utopian framings not only dismiss possibilities for societal critique, they also overrule serious engagements with local residents' and asylum seekers' voices and lived experiences. Despite the fact that the GHC has inspired projects across Germany, national debates and policy recommendations based on the lessons learned from such projects have been rare. However, improvements in asylum accommodation require existing alternative solutions to enter national media and political discourse.

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