



# Living in a ‘free jail’: Asylum seekers’ and local residents’ experiences of discomfort with asylum seeker accommodation

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## ABSTRACT

This paper shows how asylum seeker accommodation produces a politics of discomfort among both asylum seekers as well as local residents. The paper compares two collective asylum centres located in the city of Augsburg, Germany, one of which is a nationally renowned refugee integration project, the ‘Grandhotel Cosmopolis’, the other, a state-run asylum centre. Data was obtained through participant observation and semi-structured interviews between September 2016 and November 2017. Drawing on carceral geographies, the paper identifies three mechanisms through which the material and institutional standards of asylum accommodation generate discomfort among and between asylum seekers and local residents, which are self-mortification, depersonalization and role-breakdown. Through the sharing of rooms and facilities, asylum accommodation contributes to asylum seekers’ self-mortification, referring to changes in the conceptions and beliefs of oneself. The comparison of the two cases highlights how large asylum centres depersonalize asylum seekers by creating images of a homogenized ‘mass’ and contribute to role-breakdown, meaning a reduction of individuals’ identities performed with regard to work, home or family life. National discourses of asylum seekers as dangerous merged with the space of asylum accommodation, thereby preventing social interaction ‘as neighbours’ between asylum seekers and local residents. Overall, the paper exposes how a politics of discomfort utilizes affect as a governmental device, thereby turning asylum accommodation into a carceral space by creating social distance and ‘moral closure’.

## 1. Introduction

In 2012, long before the so-called refugee crisis of 2015, the ‘Grandhotel Cosmopolis’ (GHC) opened its doors, a grassroots project combining asylum accommodation, a tourist hotel, spaces for artists, a café and a restaurant in the city of Augsburg, Germany. The GHC’s playful engagement with notions of comfort and luxury, such as its red carpet at the main entrance, can be interpreted as a political statement against a decades-long process of lowering accommodation standards for asylum seekers in Germany (Müller, 2010). The lowering of minimum accommodation standards mirrors an EU wide system of deterrence policies seeking to lessen Germany’s attractiveness as a destination country for future refugees (Glorius & Doornik, 2020). Two kinds of deterrence policies are applied across the EU: External deterrence policies prevent asylum seekers from entering the country of asylum through legal or physical means such as visa restrictions, air travel restrictions, off-shore processing centres or physical borders including the interception of boats in international waters (FitzGerald,

2019). Internal deterrence measures exclude asylum seekers already within the destination country through restricting access to socio-economic and political rights or through other legal measures such as safe third country agreements facilitating the detention and deportation of asylum seekers (Boswell, 2003).

Asylum accommodation plays a key role in German asylum policy, as it is one of several internal deterrence measures through which restrictions to socio-economic rights are enforced (Muy, 2016). In the decades from 1973 onwards, asylum seekers’ material living conditions were purposively downgraded to curb the number of asylum seekers and to counter perceptions on the abuse of asylum which had entered the public debate (Münch, 2014). New restrictions required that social benefits were to be paid in kind, as well as forcing asylum seekers to live in collective asylum accommodation and restricting their right to work (Müller, 2010). In 1993, the ‘Asylum Seekers Benefits Act’ (ASBA) was introduced, which regulates both accommodation and financial benefits for asylum seekers and effectively separated asylum seekers’ welfare provisions from those of the general population (Bosswick, 2000). The

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requirement to stay in collective facilities was one of several restrictive measures aiming to deter future asylum seekers (Müller, 2010). The ASBA of 1993 and its amendment in 2015 include not only a material reduction in benefits for asylum seekers, but was also an important symbolic measure that sought to appease public outcries over the alleged abuse of asylum (Schammann, 2015).

Despite the global popularity of deterrence policies, there is little evidence that deterrence policies are effective in impacting the decision making of future refugees and migrants. According to Gammeltof-Hansen and Tan (2017), both internal and external deterrence policies are ineffective and not sustainable; not only do deterrence policies violate international human rights or refugee law and are extremely costly, on the long-term they also disrupt international solidarity and fail to deter future migrants. More, internal deterrence policies such as restrictions in welfare or substandard housing have been shown to negatively affect the integration and mental health of asylum seekers (Bakker et al., 2016; Ghorashi, 2005). Internal deterrence policies remain popular instruments of migration policy making as they are integral to the securitization of migration, meaning the political and institutional framing of migration and asylum as a source of risk and insecurity (Huysmans, 2006). Deterrence policies continue to be implemented as they serve as a public spectacle demonstrating governmental control on issues of migration (Welch & Schuster, 2005). Following Darling (2011, p. 269), restrictive governmental measures “are focused upon the production of uncertainty and the perpetuation of a politics of discomfort which acts to reassure and enable the comfort and ‘ease’ of others”. Yet while this public spectacle might be effective on the national level, on a municipal and neighbourhood level the pursuit of a ‘politics of discomfort’ towards asylum seekers enacted by downgrading accommodation standards may have adverse consequences which create discomfort and insecurity for both asylum seekers and more established residents and ultimately reinforce stigmatization and moral closure.

This paper presents an in-depth investigation of the discomforting effects of asylum accommodation on asylum seekers and local residents living in close proximity to an asylum centre. In contrast to the assumption that asylum seekers’ discomfort creates a sense of comfort for local residents, the findings illustrate how the purposive lowering of accommodation standards creates discomfort and moral closure among both asylum seekers and local residents. Drawing on carceral geographies, this paper argues that the material and institutional structures of asylum centres generate discomfort by way of three mechanisms, self-mortification, depersonalization and role-breakdown. The paper proceeds as follows: The second section introduces the theoretical foundations of the paper, connecting work in carceral geographies with recent work on the governance of affect through materiality and architecture. Subsequently, section three introduces the two case studies and section four the methodological approach. Section five discusses the three mechanisms contributing to asylum seekers and local residents discomfort. The paper concludes with a call to address the effects of a politics of discomfort on everyday social relations and the production of asylum accommodation as a carceral space.

### 1.1. The affective politics of asylum accommodation

As mentioned in the introduction, the politics of discomfort is part of the securitization of migration (Huysmans, 2006), the rationale behind which is to deter future migrants while simultaneously demonstrating control over asylum seekers and providing comfort and reassurance to a witnessing public. The identification of a collective threat to national security has the effect of unifying a political community by distinguishing between an ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Huysmans, 2006). In other words, spreading fear and insecurity about asylum seekers gives rise to a collective ‘us’. By consequence, “migration and asylum become a factor in a constitutive political dialectic in which securing unity and identity of a community depends on making this very community insecure” (ibid, p.47). According to Huysmans, a political and media discourse of

insecurity is itself not sufficient to sustain the claim that asylum seekers are a source of danger; in order to uphold this claim practices are needed which administer asylum seekers’ exclusion in everyday life. Asylum accommodation is thus part of a politics which purposefully manufactures feelings of unease and discomfort in order to legitimize measures of security against immigrants (Bigo, 2002).

#### 1.1.1. The carceral qualities of asylum accommodation

This paper draws on carceral geographies to understand how a politics of discomfort works in and through asylum accommodation. While prisons remain a key topic within carceral geographies, the field now considers the prison to be only one version of a carceral space which is imbricated in a wider carceral system. Moran et al. (2018) suggest that carceral experiences are both subjective and relational, allowing for an expansion of and comparison between carceral sites and experiences and propose three conditions through which carceral conditions can be understood. First, detriment as “the lived experience of harm”, which is associated with “the confiscation of various types of opportunity or potentiality that would otherwise have been available, and whose loss is experienced as detrimental” (ibid, p.677). The second carceral condition is ‘intention’, referring to an agent who is responsible for incurring detrimental experiences. In the case of asylum policy, intention can be conceptualized as ‘deliberate political indifference’ towards forced migrants (Davies et al., 2017). The third carceral condition is ‘spatiality’ which describes “diverse (im)material techniques and technologies (which deliver intent), and the spatial relationships to them” (Moran et al., 2018, p. 679). Asylum accommodation can thus be understood as a carceral space, as its residents experience a certain degree of suffering which is directly related to a political rationale and is delivered through the spatial form of collective asylum seeker accommodation. Although asylum accommodation exhibits differences in the degrees of openness or closedness (Zill, van Liempt, Spierings, Hooimeijer, 2020), these differences all exist along a ‘carceral continuum’ varying only in their degrees and experiences of unfreedom (Moran, 2015). The main focus of this paper is on the connection between the first and third carceral condition, that is, on the link between detriment and spatiality within asylum accommodation. Detriment as the lived experience of harm is understood as on the one hand an individual affective experience of discomfort as well as a set of structural governmental policies termed the ‘politics of discomfort’. The link between the spatiality of asylum accommodation, composed of material and institutional structures, and affect is explored in the next subsection.

#### 1.1.2. The comfort and discomfort of buildings: manipulating affect through architecture

The manipulation of affective states of individuals is a key governmental strategy within a politics of discomfort. As demonstrated by work in migration studies, affect may be used by states to control and exclude, as well as a means of resistance against state practices (Di Gregorio & Merolli, 2016) or to create a desired political outcome such as community cohesion (Fortier, 2010). Pile (2010, p.8) summarizes the main characteristics of affect as ‘pre-cognitive, trans-personal and non-representational’. First, affect is pre-cognitive in that it occurs before its translation into emotion. Second, affect is also ‘non-representational’, that is, it cannot be ‘made known’ or represented. This necessarily presents a challenge to those wishing to study affect. One way around this difficulty is to conceptualize affect in terms of what it *does*, as “the *how*” or “the *motion* of emotion” (original emphasis, Thien, 2005, p. 451). A third characteristic of affect is that it is transpersonal, that is, affect is not constrained to one body, but operates between bodies (Pile, 2010). It is this transpersonal capacity of affect which explains how the manipulation of affect can be used as a governmental strategy. Ahmed (2004) explains the transpersonal capacity of affect as functioning like an economy; similar to the notion of capital, affect is produced through its circulation, thereby uniting or dividing people.

Following this understanding of affect, discomfort, unease, fear and

insecurity are cognitive, reflexive emotions, while also being associated with pre-cognitive, bodily states. While these terms are often used interchangeably, there is merit in further unpacking the notion of ‘discomfort’. In his study of migrant Australians experiences of belonging and racism, Noble (2005, p. 113) conceptualized comfort as ‘ontological security’, defining it as “the confidence or trust we have in the world around us, both in terms of the things and the people with which we share our lives, and hence which provide stability and a continuity to our identity. This trust is more sensual and affective than it is cognitive, grounded in the routines and spaces of daily existence”. This definition links individuals’ experiences of comfort to situated environmental experiences; feelings of comfort and security are the result of a trusting relationship between individuals and their environment. Comfort is thus not a passive feeling, but is “the ‘fit’ we experience in relation to the spaces we inhabit and the practices we perform” (ibid, p.114). The degree to which an individual experiences themselves as ‘fitting’ into an environment depends both on their own actions and capacity to make themselves ‘fit’, as well as on other people’s recognition of an individual as belonging into this particular environment (Noble, 2005).

Geographies of architecture and its discussion of affect helps understand the transpersonal affective capacities of asylum accommodation and its effects. According to Thrift (2004), the design of urban spaces is an example of the political engineering of affect, by which is meant that political attitudes are influenced by bodily reactions. Following this line of thinking, Kraftl and Adey (2008) compare two seemingly different spaces, a kindergarten and an airport prayer room in their capacity to facilitate inhabitation. Their analysis shows how the kindergarten is designed in harmony with its natural surroundings by using natural materials or no harsh corners, thereby evoking feelings such as welcome and homeliness in both children and adults. Separated from the main building, the airport prayer room evokes a sense of familiarity and relaxation through particular objects such as candles or wall art and the boundedness of its space. The comparison of the two spaces highlighted that space can be designed to facilitate certain affects such as homeliness or relaxation, which are often informed by particular political assumptions such as about childhood or religiosity. While architectural experience can channel affect and is thus not ‘innocent’, it is important to stress that the manipulation of affect through architecture does not work in a straightforward manner. How humans experience buildings is not only shaped by affect, but also by other factors such as discourse, rationality, past experiences, emotions and judgements (Rose et al., 2010). This distinction is helpful as it allows for the political manipulation of peoples affective experiences, while recognizing that people are not empty vessels but experience buildings differently based on their own biography or individuality. The following section gives a short introduction to asylum in Germany and a description of the two case studies.

### 1.2. Asylum in Augsburg: two case studies

Asylum seeker reception and accommodation in Germany is characterized by a high variability of reception practices, as well as high amounts of discretion for municipalities (Hinger et al., 2016; Schammann, 2015). Accommodation standards are defined by each of the sixteen federal states, while no regulations are made on state level. Variability in reception practices is a consequence of the division of legal competences between the national level, the sixteen federal states and the local level. Claims to asylum are processed by a national authority, the BAMF, while federal states have the oversight and task of organizing asylum seeker reception and accommodation. Federal states delegate the task of reception and accommodation to local governments, with the exception of the federal state of Bavaria, in which the district governments are responsible for accommodation. Local governments’ right to self-governance determines the extent to which a municipality will offer services beyond the nationally mandated level. This division in

competences between the national, federal and local level leads to large differences in asylum seeker reception and accommodation, which Schammann (2015, p. 31) describes as a “patchwork of non-voluntary everyday realities”.

Accommodation standards on a local level are in part determined by the existence of basic minimum standards within federal state asylum law, as well as by the specific actor constellations within a local migration regime (Hinger et al., 2016; Schammann, 2015). Hence, the lack of minimum standards on a federal state level does not necessarily determine the quality of accommodation on a local level, as local governments may opt to voluntarily implement higher reception and accommodation standards on the basis of local integration policies (Aumüller et al., 2015). According to Wendel (2014), only half of Germany’s federal states defined a set of minimum accommodation standards and even fewer introduced control mechanisms to assess their implementation. The state of Bavaria issued a set of non-mandatory minimum standards in 2010 (see Table 1), which apply only to accommodation provided directly by the district administrations of Bavaria, yet not for accommodation organized by municipalities. Yet during the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’, many federal states, including Bavaria, suspended their recommended or mandatory minimum standards (Fahn, 2016). It is therefore unsurprising that the German Institute for Human Rights (Engelmann & Rabe, 2017, p. 60) concludes that “the basic human rights of inhabitants of collective asylum centres cannot be systematically ensured”.

The city of Augsburg is located in the South-East of Germany in the state of Bavaria and has a population of nearly 300.000 inhabitants. Up to 1250 asylum seekers are accommodated in Augsburg in three different types of temporary accommodation, consisting of 12 state-administered collective asylum centres (Ger. “Gemeinschaftsunterkunft” or ‘GU’), 38 municipal decentralized housing units with no more than 50 asylum seekers each and several facilities for unaccompanied minors. In 2018, the majority of asylum seeking persons in Augsburg came from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria and Somalia; about 65% of these were registered as male, 35% as female (Stadt Augsburg, 2018).

The selection of the first case study, the ‘Grandhotel Cosmopolis’ (GHC) is based on the uniqueness of its concept and its potential to study the effects of higher degrees of spatial, material and institutional openness of asylum accommodation on everyday social interactions (Zill, Spierings, & Van Liempt, 2020). The selection of the second case study, the ‘Gemeinschaftsunterkunft Ottostraße’ (GUO) is based on differences in its material and institutional dimensions, accommodating more than twice the number of inhabitants than the GHC. We opted for a comparative case study located within the same city to minimize the contextual differences between the two cases. The GHC (see picture 1) was initiated in 2013 and is one of the first cases of innovation in asylum

**Table 1**

Overview accommodation standards Bavaria 2010–2015 Bayerisches Staatsministerium (2010).

Minimum space per person	Min. 7m <sup>2</sup>
<b>Number of people per room</b>	4 (max 6)
<b>Rooms</b>	Separated by gender (exception families) Families in separate rooms
<b>Kitchen facilities</b>	Four hobs per eight people, two ovens per kitchen
<b>Bathroom facilities</b>	Sink for five to seven people Showers for max 10 people One toilet per 10 people, separated by gender
<b>Other facilities</b>	<i>In case local circumstances permit for the following:</i> Common rooms Outdoor areas Play and homework room for children Room for ill people
<b>Location of accommodation</b>	“wherever possible, in or in close proximity to residential environment”



Picture 1. Grandhotel Cosmopolis 'GHC' (picture by author).

accommodation in Europe. Located in a former elderly care home built in the 1950s, the building was abandoned in 2007 as it no longer met modern care home standards. In 2012, local artists and activists renovated the building over the course of one year, during which they gave public tours and organized events. The first group of asylum seekers arrived in August 2013 and in October 2013 the GHC opened for hotel guests. The building has 56 rooms for asylum seekers, 12 hotel rooms, 10 hostel rooms and 18 artists' studios (Grandhotel Cosmopolis, 2018). The original plan of mixing asylum seekers' and hotel rooms was opposed by the local district administration who is responsible for the accommodation of asylum seekers, meaning that the floors of asylum seekers and hotel guests are clearly separated and only connected by a common staircase. The second asylum centre, GUO, is located in a former manufacturing plant for sleeves of hot air balloons, dating back to the 1920s (see picture 2). Since then, it was turned into an office building of the same company and later abandoned. In 2012 the building was acquired by the local district administration, who transformed it into an asylum seeker reception facility. The building houses about 160 asylum seekers, including disabled refugees, as it is one of the few that has a barrier-free entrance and bathrooms. Families with children live on the ground floor, families and single traveling women on the first floor and single traveling men on the second floor.

## 2. Methods

This research used a combination of ethnographic methods to investigate the perceptions and experiences of comfort and discomfort of living in an asylum centre and in direct vicinity to it. The material presented draws upon fourteen months of qualitative data collected between September 2016 and November 2017, employing participant observation and semi-structured interviews as the main methods for data collection. Specifically, the main researcher volunteered in the café of the GHC, which was a good space to observe daily interactions between members of staff, volunteers, asylum seekers, hotel guests and local residents. In the second case, long hours of participant observation and 'hanging out' proved difficult, as there were no comparable semi-public spaces as in the first case. To compensate for this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the centre administrator, a social worker of the centre and several representatives of neighbourhood organizations to provide additional insights into the everyday lives of residents living in the centre as well as into the overall character the neighbourhood and its residents. Upon invitation from volunteers of GUO who had been informed about the ongoing research activities, the main researcher joined several homework tutoring sessions which were attended mostly by families with children. These homework sessions were not used to provide primary data, but used as an opportunity to collect secondary data on the general atmosphere and character of interactions within the centre.

There were considerable differences in the process of obtaining access to two case studies; access to the GHC involved presenting the proposed research to the management team of the GHC, to which the first author already had personal ties from previous research. Access to the second case study was more formalized as it involved contacting and gaining approval from the centre administrator. These differences in gaining access also reflected the positionality of the main researcher within the two settings; in the second case, being a researcher was considerably less questioned than in the first case. One of the reasons for this difference was that the GHC can be considered an 'over-researched place', that is, a place that is 'disproportionately targeted' by students, researchers and journalists (Neal et al., 2016). Over-research in the case of the GHC presented a challenge for recruiting interview participants among resident asylum seekers, especially women, as it created 'research fatigue' and distrust towards researchers and journalists (Zill, 2021, in press).

As the first author has a long-standing relationship with the GHC which was established before the project gained national media attention, the author entered into dialogue with the management team of the



Picture 2. Gemeinschaftsunterkunft Ottostraße 'GUO' (picture by author).

GHC to discuss the conditions under which research was possible and ethically feasible. Together with its management team, the first author decided to be an active volunteer in the GHC in order to establish a more reciprocal, long-term relationship to minimize the ethical dilemmas associated with ‘fly-in-fly-out’ research (Mackenzie et al., 2007). Over a period of fourteen months, the main researcher was not only present on an almost daily basis, but also volunteered in the café of the GHC, during a public events or by helping out in project related tasks, such as helping with English translations for social media texts. The researchers’ active involvement in the project before, during and after the research period helped build more reciprocal research relations and to ‘give back’ to a certain extent. Being present on a regular basis also provided the time to further explain the purpose of research to staff and residents and, whenever possible, enter into dialogue about the conducted research. Next to ‘giving back’, volunteering also facilitated the observation of everyday interactions in order to get a general impression of the research context and helped to introduce the research to potential research participants, many of whom were volunteers themselves or were otherwise present on a regular basis in the semi-public spaces of the GHC. The active involvement of the main researcher over a longer period of time thus permitted to build a sense of familiarity with potential research participants, while at the same time introducing the content and purpose of the research long before an interview took place. In order to stay in dialogue about the research, the main author returned to the GHC as an ‘academic-in-residence’ between October 2019 and January 2020. During this period, the main author organized a public event at which the findings of the research were presented.

The research opted for a heterogeneous sample in terms of age, gender, country of origin and length of residence in the centre or neighbourhood to allow for a range of experiences and opinions (see Table 2). Local residents of both cases were recruited through distributing leaflets in the two neighbourhoods, through snowballing and by directly approaching individuals in the vicinity of both centres, which proved to be most successful way of recruitment. Asylum seekers in the GHC were recruited by directly approaching them in the semi-public spaces of the house, while only few were recruited through snowballing or via gatekeepers who were residents of GHC or had a refugee background themselves. Asylum seekers living in GUO were recruited mostly through gatekeepers, which were members of the neighbourhood support group or via a fellow refugee who was friends with several residents of the centre. Despite efforts to be reflexive on power-relations as well as on questions of positionality in both settings, research with vulnerable groups such as asylum seekers will always remain ‘messy’ and ethically challenging and bear certain risks due to the relatively precarious position of individuals (Frazier, 2020; Hugman et al., 2011).

A total of thirty-one semi-structured interviews with local residents

**Table 2**  
Overview respondents GHC and GUO.

	Case 1: ‘Grandhotel Cosmopolis’	Case 2: ‘GU Ottostraße’
Asylum seekers (Total = 30)		
Gender	2 female 13 male	8 female 7 male
Ages	21 to 48	14 to 43
Countries of origin	Afghanistan, Syria, Senegal, Kosovo, Iran, Sierra Leone, Morocco, Tunisia	Syria, Afghanistan, Uganda, Eritrea, Senegal
Length of residence in centre	Five months to ca 4 years	Six months to ca 2,5 years
Local residents (Total = 31)		
Gender	6 female 8 male	9 female 8 male
Ages	31 to 65	23 to 68
Countries of origin	Germany, Austria, Cuba, Montenegro	Germany, Croatia
Length of residence in neighbourhood	several months to over twenty years	several months to several decades

of both cases were conducted. The interviews were held in German in a location of the participant’s choice and lasted between half an hour and one and a half hours. Several local residents in second case were hesitant or refused to be interviewed about the topic of asylum, demonstrating that asylum constitutes a sensitive and potentially divisive topic among residents. The obtained interviews are nevertheless illustrative of a wide variety of opinions regarding the topic and the complexity of the issue. In addition, thirty interviews with asylum seekers were conducted in a setting of their choice. The majority of interviews with asylum seekers was conducted in either English or German, a translator was used only in few cases. Quotes in the results section are marked either with ‘O’ meaning ‘original’ and are taken from interviews conducted in English, while quotes marked with ‘T’ are translated from German. After gaining consent from participants, all interviews were recorded, transcribed and anonymized. All interviews were analysed together with observations in MAXQDA. The themes structuring the results section, self-mortification, depersonalization and role-breakdown, emerged from the data using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014).

### 2.1. Assaults on ‘the self’: discomfort as self-mortification

The following three sections demonstrate how asylum accommodation produces a politics of discomfort by manipulating the affective experiences of both asylum seekers and local residents. As Moran et al. (2018) argue, detriment, or the experience of suffering is a characteristic of carceral conditions, along with the intent to induce suffering. In the case of asylum accommodation, intent is conceived as the politics of discomfort, part of which is the mandatory housing of asylum seekers in collective forms of accommodation. The following three sections seek to highlight the precise mechanisms and effects of a politics of discomfort and the subsequent production of carceral conditions within asylum accommodation. This section describes how affective encounters with material and institutional elements of asylum accommodation, such as the over-crowding of rooms, unhygienic living conditions and insufficient safety measures contribute to asylum seekers’ self-mortification. According to Goffman (1961, p. 32), physical and symbolic degradations, such as contaminated food, a lack of hygiene or denial of personal possessions can lead to self-mortification within institutional living environments, describing a process in which “the boundary that the individual places between his being and the environment is invaded and the embodiments of self profaned”. Consequentially, self-mortification induces changes in individuals’ conceptions and beliefs of themselves.

A key characteristic of collective forms of asylum accommodation across Germany is the sharing of kitchen and bathroom facilities. Asylum seekers’ perceptions of shared kitchen and bathroom facilities conveyed a sense of affective discomfort as the facilities were often reported to be unclean and unhygienic. The recommended Bavarian standards stipulate that eight people share four stove hobs, with a maximum of two ovens per kitchen; in the case of GHC and GUO, this amounted to about twenty people sharing one kitchen. Similarly, accommodation standards recommend one shower for ten people, with bathrooms separated by gender. For both cases this meant that nearly twenty people shared one bathroom. Emenike, a man in his late twenties, explained the difficulties of having to share unclean facilities, highlighting the connection between physical contamination and affective and emotional experiences:

“Most times I just, I feel somehow. You go to the kitchen, you can’t even bring your friend to the kitchen, because it’s been messed up. Nobody cares, just live the life anyhow. It’s not really nice, you cannot live life like that. When I see those things, I feel somehow.” (Emenike, GHC, O)

Emenike’s statement clearly demonstrates how his encounter with unhygienic living conditions is an affective experience that leads to certain emotional reactions, such as feeling a sense of shame, expressed

through his statement that he does not want his friend to see how he lives. This affective encounter with ‘matter out of place’ also shapes his perceptions of others, conveying a sense that ‘nobody cares’.

A second source of discomfort for asylum seekers living in GHC and GUO were feelings of personal unsafety. The findings indicate that large asylum centres, such as GUO, may be associated with higher degrees of unsafety, particularly for vulnerable groups, such as women and children. Female asylum seekers of both cases experienced feelings of unsafety due to shared bathroom facilities. Both GHC and GUO accommodate members of both genders and are therefore termed ‘mixed accommodation facilities’. Previous studies have shown that mixed facilities often lead to “structural situations of potential threat for women” (Foroutan et al., 2017, p. 13). Although a separation of floors and bathroom facilities is recommended, several female respondents explained that this separation by gender does not always hold up in practice. According to Aretta, a woman in her late twenties, maintaining hygienic conditions and personal safety for women remained a problem in the GHC:

“The only problem we have is with toilet, is too dirty. You know, is a public toilet, and they clean, we don’t have secure in the toilet, you know, like, for women. Men also go there to take their shower, and is very bad, because sometimes you might go inside and you saw woman naked. So I think that is the only problem in this floor. We don’t have key to lock it. [...] You know we are woman, we need privacy and we also need the place to be clean.” (Aretta, GHC, O)

Aretta’s statement illustrates how insufficient material standards contribute to affective experiences of discomfort, understood here as a form of ‘ontological insecurity’. Rationales of securitization, such as the impossibility to lock showers, create conditions of structural unsafety. Asylum accommodation frames asylum seekers as a source of risk, with the consequence that it is not their own but other people’s safety that has to be ensured (Huysmans, 2006). Aretta’s statement highlights that women and children are unequally targeted by a politics of discomfort, revealing the gendered dimension of the securitization of migration (Gerard & Pickering, 2013).

While affective experiences can lead to certain emotional experiences, an individual’s reactions to these affective experiences may not be straightforward. This is the case when an affective experiences trigger the agency of the individual; as Rose et al. (2010) stress, buildings only have a limited capacity to manipulate affective experience, as rationality, memory and past experience are just as important in shaping people’s actions. The empirical data thus also shows several instances in which respondents challenged affective experiences of discomfort. The fight against unhygienic conditions is evidence of agency on the side of asylum seekers seeking to counter the effects of self-mortification. By taking control over unhygienic conditions, asylum seekers re-establish trust in their environment, which helps to restore a sense of comfort (Noble, 2005). Benesh, a young woman who had lived in GUO for about two years, described the usage of bathroom facilities as a daily battle against discomfort. Her statement vividly illustrates how her fight against contamination was simultaneously a fight to take control over an unclean environment and preserve her physical and psychological boundaries.

“I bought a disinfectant, yes, I remember very well, I bought it and I put it into a bag and in this bag I also had toilet paper, those things that you normally use. And then, this was like a weapon, like a strong police weapon and armed with the bag I went in.” (Benesh, GUO, T)

The battle against contamination not only prompted asylum seekers to clean facilities voluntarily, but in the case of GUO, also aligned staff and asylum seekers against institutionalized discomfort, thereby shining a light on the insufficiency of current accommodation standards. These findings are also in line with work stressing that asylum seekers held in spaces of confinement such as detention centres or offshore processing

centres are not devoid of agency (Mountz, 2011). Kaamishah, a girl in her early teens and her father Bahirun explained:

Kaamishah: „The staff is really nice, everybody really [...] There was one family, they did not receive a status, so they cleaned the kitchen. But since they are gone, everyone has to clean for themselves, otherwise the kitchen would explode. So we also help.”

Bahirun: “We help the staff. One one staff member is alone and nobody cleans, we help them. They are great.”

(Kaamishah & Bahirun, GUO, T)

While there is not enough evidence to fully determine how common alliances between members of staff and residents were, several interviewees mentioned the friendliness of staff members, some of whom also helped residents in his free time. These forms of agency and connection are important to take account of, as they demonstrate the limitations of a politics of discomfort to determine the actions of both asylum seekers and members of staff. Both statements illustrate that while the experience of contamination and unhygienic facilities may create affective experiences, how people respond to these experiences may not align with their predetermined intent. Overall, this section demonstrates that experiences of self-mortification can be understood to be an invasion of an individuals’ physical and mental boundaries through the creation of living conditions that endanger the physical and mental health of an individual. Living conditions such as in the case of asylum accommodation can be described as another case of deliberate state inaction; as Davies et al. (2017) reason, it is not due to a lack of resources that marginalized groups experience inadequate or even dangerous living conditions within the advanced welfare systems of Northern Europe. Rather, insufficient living conditions can be interpreted as a way to exert power and control over asylum seekers’ bodies through the denial of sufficient care and attention to public health. Ultimately, the denial of care and sufficient living conditions serves the wider rationale of internal deterrence policies. As noted in Wendel (2014, p. 53), the Bavarian asylum implementation regulation stated until 2013 that the dispersal and allocation of accommodation should encourage an individuals’ willingness to return. While this sentence was removed, deterrence has remained the cornerstone of European migration policy (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Tan, 2017), with state inaction as one of its key mechanisms. The following section will illustrate how material and institutional structures of asylum accommodation contribute to the depersonalization of its residents.

## 2.2. Creating a mass: discomfort as depersonalization

This section discusses how the material and institutional structures of asylum accommodation contribute to asylum seekers’ depersonalization. Buildings are more than their usage, as architecture can act as a symbolic referent for social difference or status (Kraftl, 2010). Correspondingly, Diken (2004, p. 92) describes asylum accommodation as “materialization of a ‘fear of touching’”. Similarly, Haselbacher and Rosenberger (2018, p. 263) understand asylum centres as a materialization of “the generalized, sometimes diffuse and abstract national discourse about the dangers and threats of immigration [...] National political debates and topics turn into personal experiences and concerns”. Yet asylum centres are also more than a materialization of political and media discourse in the personal sphere, as their material and institutional structures, such as their size or architecture, has certain affective capacities which may reinforce or challenge local residents’ discomfort with asylum centres. The comparison of the two cases highlights that the relatively high number of people accommodated in GUO contributes to depersonalization, while the institutional character of both cases shapes perceptions and everyday interaction between asylum seekers and local residents.

National discourses play an important role in shaping attitudes

towards asylum seekers (Crawley et al., 2016), yet few studies analyse to what extent local residents' attitudes are directly related to the affective capacities of asylum accommodation. Respondents of both cases felt that the amount and way of communication by authorities had influenced local residents' attitudes about the centre. According to several interviewees, state authorities failed to inform and include local residents at an early stage. State authorities' manner of communication was critiqued for being slow and indirect in the beginning, which was said to have caused feelings of betrayal, anger and helplessness among local residents. Local residents' exclusion from the centres' planning phase caused feelings of anger and discomfort among local residents, as the possibility to participate in affairs close to home constitutes an important way through which comfort and a sense of local belonging is achieved (Yarker, 2019). This is illustrated by the statement of Julia, a female neighbourhood resident in her early twenties:

„We learned about it because at one point there was a Din-A4 sized piece of paper on the building. Other than that, we did not hear about it. They completely kept it a secret, which in the beginning led to huge protests, because they really didn't inform us. They presented the whole issue as accomplished facts to the street, the neighbourhood, and that made a lot of people angry.“ (Julia, GUO, T)

Previous studies have shown that state and local authorities failure to inform local residents about the opening of asylum seeker accommodation contributes to protest and opposition against asylum accommodation (Aumüller et al., 2015). According to Huysmans (2006), feelings of insecurity stem from being unable to identify who is dangerous and who is not. While not informing local residents about the opening of a centre and its residents may not be motivated by the explicit intent to create insecurity, it nevertheless creates the effect of 'not knowing'. As local residents already have a certain amount of knowledge on asylum seekers gained through national and regional media reporting, a lack of specific information may contribute to an information imbalance between non-local information which is highly informed by stereotypes and local information which is largely based on direct experience (Blommaert et al., 2003). Local residents thus experience discomfort in the sense of ontological insecurity as the upcoming changes in their direct surroundings remain unknown, while the new asylum seeking residents of the neighbourhood are not 'unknown' but 'already known' as strangers (Ahmed, 2000).

Local residents also undertook measures that sought to personalize the centre's residents. During the opening of GUO, a nearby local NGO initiated a support group for the centre, which according to its members played a crucial role in mediating and communicating between asylum seekers, centre staff and local residents. One measure that aimed at personalizing asylum seekers was the issuing of a newspaper by members of the support group. The content of the newspapers ranged from background information on the political situation in asylum seekers' countries of origin, interviews with local police officers and residents of the centre to recipes (see picture 3). According to a social worker, these activities contributed to public acceptance:

“I really think that this helps reduce fears. I also think, the knowledge that there are other German neighbours that offer help and are in contact with them, that that has a comforting effect for other neighbours.”

(Ina, social worker, GUO, T)

A second aspect which contributed to asylum seekers' depersonalization was their accommodation as 'blocks of people'. Lofland (1973) distinguishes between individual and categorical knowing, that is, having unique, personal knowledge of a person or knowledge based on role or status. While direct neighbours of the GHC claimed they would recognize the GHC' inhabitants 'anywhere' in the city and even claimed to notice asylum seekers' absence (Zill, Spierings, & Van Liempt, 2020), individual recognition in the case of GUO was limited to asylum seekers



Picture 3. The neighbourhood newspaper 'Otto2'.

with distinct characteristics, such as being particularly tall or sitting in a wheelchair. The comparison of the two cases thus indicates that the number of residents per centre influences individual recognition, with larger centres reinforcing processes of categorical recognition. Knowing asylum seekers only categorically may have negative effects on everyday interaction by reinforcing processes of stigmatization.

Several local residents of GUO, such as Anita, had difficulties recognizing individual asylum seekers, as to them, large-scale collective accommodation created perceptions of asylum seekers as an undifferentiated mass.

“In the beginning, before the centre was occupied, the neighbourhood was allowed to view the centre. And we saw that a family lives in one room, I thought that was too small. If they had only half the amount of residents, it would have been different, but like this ... I think it creates a mass. [...] From the beginning it was too many people for one room.” (Anita, GUO, T)

Anita's statement was echoed by Orisa, a young woman in her late twenties living in GUO, who similarly felt that the high number of residents creates a 'block of people' and that living in one's own apartment would be beneficial to everyday interaction:

“I would love to have this contact, at the same time they don't, like for [the neighbours] it's hard because it's one block of so many people, like so many new people, so many refugees in this place and that's why maybe they are a little bit, not feeling comfortable about it. And it's different if you would be in an individual apartment, like your own place then it's okay, one or two houses, where people can come and knock on your door.” (Orisa, GUO, O)

Over-crowded living conditions may not only visually homogenize its inhabitants; through the negative effects on mental and physical health on its residents it may also contribute to conflict, which in turn reinforces perceptions of asylum seekers as prone to violence. As Aarash, a man in his late twenties living explained, governmental decisions on accommodation standards are left unquestioned, while asylum seekers are blamed:

“Asylum centre, different people in one room, for example six people or five, that is so bad. That’s stupid, the police will come, all neighbours see them and say, asylum seekers are shit, always fights, always problems. But the government also makes a mistake, to put so many different people in one room, you can’t do that.” (Aarash, GHC, T)

In summary, the combination of a lack of specific and contextual information as well as their visual homogenization through high numbers of residents reduced asylum seekers to a ‘metaphysical category’ behind which the individual was obscured to local residents. Therefore, the politics of discomfort works not only through creating unpleasant experiences for asylum seekers, but has wider implications as its material components, along with the presence of multiple bodies, reinforces existing perceptions about asylum seekers. More, local residents’ and asylum seekers’ affective discomfort is transpersonal (Ahmed, 2004), as feelings of anxiety, shame or anger circulate between the inside and outside of the centre. Based on our findings, this effect is stronger for centres with higher numbers of residents, as larger centres increase anonymity and stigmatization by reinforcing categorical instead of individual recognition of asylum seekers. The overall effect is what Goffman described as ‘moral closure’, a ‘state of mind’, thereby creating a carceral spatiality through a mental demarcation of those on the ‘inside’ and those on the ‘outside’. The following section discusses role-breakdown as a third effect of a politics of discomfort.

### 2.3. Normal neighbours? Discomfort as role-breakdown

Next to asylum seekers depersonalization, asylum accommodation also contributes to the effect of ‘role-breakdown’ or ‘civil death’, meaning a partial or complete breakdown of roles asylum seekers previously performed with regard to work, home or family life. In this sense, affective discomfort works relationally by aligning individuals with or against each other (Ahmed, 2004). In both case studies, a partial ‘role breakdown’ was apparent in the sense that most local residents did not regard asylum seekers as their neighbours, nor did many asylum seekers regard local residents as neighbours.

One factor that contributed to role-breakdown in both case studies was asylum seekers’ accommodation in what was perceived to be an institutional space characterized by “care and control” (Malkki, 2002, p. 353). This was evident in the fact that local residents of both neighbourhoods perceived asylum seekers as an institutionalized population simultaneously in need of protection as well as of strict governance. This perception inhibited local residents from entering an asylum centre, arguing that they were unsure whether or not entering was allowed. Others held that the centre constituted a private space and that entering would violate asylum seekers’ privacy. The following statement by Brigitte, a young woman living in the area, illustrates how a lack of information turns the centre into an ambiguous space, influencing perceptions on what one can or cannot do. Moreover, her hesitation of entering the space ‘as a woman’ also reveals a sense of fear, in which the affective capacity of asylum accommodation links up with national discourses on the dangers of immigration and especially male asylum seekers (Crawley et al., 2016).

“I don’t even know if one is allowed to [enter the centre]. Should one enter as a private person, as a woman? We wanted to donate clothes, we wanted to bring them there. [...] But we didn’t in the end, because we didn’t know, are we allowed in, should we do that? There

is just not enough ... I don’t know ... information what one can and cannot do”. (Brigitte, GUO, T)

Similarly, several respondents among asylum seekers of both centres had experienced local residents’ fear of entering asylum accommodation, which they felt inhibited normal neighbourly interactions with local residents. As Emad, a young man in his early twenties described, not only did the limited amount of space and lack of privacy make it difficult to invite or host guests, local residents fear of entering asylum centres also inhibited social interaction between asylum seekers and local residents:

“When you meet someone and they say, where do you live, you can’t say, I live in an asylum centre. Even if you say, come, let’s go to my place, let’s sit down a bit, most people are afraid, they don’t want to enter a centre. And besides, you’re not alone, there are three other people.”

(Emad, GHC, T)

In both case studies, the effects of role-breakdown on social interaction were partially countered by creating temporary and permanent ‘spaces of encounter’ in and around the two centres (see [picture 4](#)). While proximity alone is not sufficient to create ‘meaningful encounters’ (Valentine, 2008), everyday spaces can still play an important role by enabling ‘prosaic negotiations’ between people and are the primary sites of negotiating difference (Amin, 2002). Particularly effective are “sites of unnoticeable cultural questioning or transgression”, spaces which “[place] people from different backgrounds in new settings where engagement with strangers in a common activity disrupts easy labelling of the stranger as enemy and initiates new attachments” (ibid, p.969f). What this implies is that it is not so much a specific type of space that facilitates meaningful encounter, but a space that encourages individual instead of categorical recognition of people, thereby disrupting processes of stereotyping.

One such space for encounter within GUO were the spaces for homeworking tutoring created by the centre’s support group. As Frank, a neighbourhood resident in his late forties explained, signing up for homework tutoring provided him with the opportunity to get to know the centre’s residents:

“And then I signed up for homework tutoring [for children], out of pragmatic reasons, because I wanted to know, when a center like that opens, I want to know who is inside. And if children or youth cause trouble on the street, I want to be able to say something to them. And this turned out to be true. [...] In this neighbourhood, people really



**Picture 4.** A neighbourhood event for asylum seekers and local residents organized on the premises of GUO (picture by author).



said, okay, if this really happening, then we want to have a say in how it is organized. And that group of people became the support circle which was present from the beginning to support the center.” (Frank, GUO, T)

Frank’s statement represents a move from ‘the outside in’, illustrating that “affect does not produce practice in any straightforward way” (Rose et al., 2010, p. 344). Despite the affective capacities ‘a centre like that’ might have had on him, these did not determine his course of action. His statement also speaks to the idea that a local sense of and belonging is established by being actively involved in shaping ones residential environment (Yarker, 2019). Similarly, Tariq, a young man in his early twenties and former resident of GUO, recounted how he and his family had very little contact with Germans in their first year living in the centre:

“When we came to Germany, we just saw people outside, they didn’t come to us, we didn’t go to them. In my home country, the whole village consists of relatives and acquaintances, so you always say hello and invite people. Here this is different, perhaps it’s cultural. And as I said, we used to be afraid, and [Germans] were also afraid. They only saw refugees on TV, the crisis and that refugees are dangerous. [...] At some point I started to say hello, some people answered, some didn’t. Then I said, I want to sit at the entrance of the centre. I put a few chairs there, I had my schischa. At first, people thought it was strange, but then a few people came to us, talked to us, had tea. That’s when I realized that we have to do something. Because we can’t just wait for people to come to us.” (Tariq, GUO, T)

Tariq’s quote is significant in several ways; not only does it illustrate the difficulties of making contact with local residents, but it also shows how national discourses influence everyday interaction, leading to fear of the other on both sides. Eventually, Tariq decided to take action by creating an open, temporary space for encounter in front of the centre. Initially perceived as ‘strange’, this temporary space provided for meaningful encounters with neighbours through its ‘strangeness’ and thereby disrupted easy labelling. This action demonstrates not only the agency on the side of asylum seekers, it simultaneously shows the lack of spaces for encounter afforded by the current residential environment, with casual interactions constrained to the side-walks or nearby supermarket.

Altogether, the institutional character of asylum accommodation and the lack of spaces for casual contact and encounter contributed to role-breakdown and the possibility of asylum seekers to be perceived as neighbours. Both cases also showcased the agency of local residents and asylum seekers, seeking to ‘open’ the centre for casual contact and interaction, thereby pushing against the carceral qualities of asylum accommodation. Both case studies demonstrate that the possibility of perceiving and encountering each other ‘as neighbours’ proves crucial to combat a politics of discomfort and moral closure on an everyday level.

### 3. Conclusion

The aim of this article is to show how asylum accommodation produces a national politics of discomfort against asylum seekers and by so doing establishes asylum accommodation as a carceral space. Contrary to assumptions that asylum seekers’ discomfort creates a sense of comfort and ease for local residents, the findings of this paper demonstrate that the politics of discomfort affects both asylum seekers as well as local residents. The paper compares asylum seekers’ and local residents’ experiences of two asylum centres in the city of Augsburg, Germany. While the first centre is a nationally renowned ‘integration project’, the ‘Grandhotel Cosmopolis (GHC), the second centre, the ‘Gemeinschaftsunterkunft Ottostraße’ (GUO), is a state-administered asylum centre, named after the street it is located in. Building on work in carceral geography, the paper illustrates how the materiality of asylum accommodation has certain affective capacities which have three

particular discomforting effects on asylum seekers and local residents, namely self-mortification, depersonalization and role-breakdown. The empirical results demonstrate how national discourses on asylum seekers merge with the space of the asylum centre, influencing local residents’ perceptions of asylum seekers and everyday interaction between the two groups and thereby contribute to social distance and moral closure.

Self-mortification, described as the influence of institutional living environments on an individual’s sense of self, was triggered by a lack of privacy, fears of contamination and feelings of unsafety. A second effect of a politics of discomfort was the depersonalization of asylum seekers, understood as their objectification, through a lack of specific, localized information on the centre in question and through the collective housing asylum seekers, creating perceptions of a homogenized mass of asylum seekers. The comparison of the two cases highlighted that depersonalization was stronger for the second case, which exhibited higher degrees of material and institutional closure as it accommodated about three times the number of asylum seekers than the first case and provided for fewer spaces of encounter. The third effect of a politics of discomfort is role-breakdown or the ‘civil death’ of asylum seekers, as local residents regarded asylum seekers not as neighbours but as an institutionalized population. Overcrowding, the lack of space and the stigma associated with asylum centres impaired both asylum seekers and local residents of both case studies in their capacity to act ‘neighbourly’ by extending invitations or performing small acts of care which often form the basis for a sense of comfort among neighbours. Overall, asylum accommodation can be framed as a carceral space, not just because of the presence of suffering, but also because higher degrees material and institutional closedness increase social distance and moral closure between asylum seekers and local residents. Despite being legally open spaces, social distance and moral closure form the invisible walls and gates of these ‘free jails’.

The comparison of the two centres advances understandings of the local effects of asylum accommodation and carceral spaces. This paper illustrated that the politics of discomfort serves only to support the securitization of migration and does not contribute to a sense of safety on an everyday level. Discomfort created feelings of unsafety and estrangement, while measures stimulating comfort provided the ground for familiarization. What then is the purpose of a politics of discomfort and for whom is it enacted? One possible answer is that affective discomfort renders local residents and asylum seekers governable; as “it is those who are familiar that are difficult to govern, not those who are different” (Bosworth, 2014, p. 211). In line with Felder et al. (2014), we argue that quasi-carceral spaces, such as asylum accommodation, may lay the groundwork for further violence and imprisonment by contributing to processes of moral closure, indifference or ‘violent inaction’ (Davies et al., 2017). The decades long process of lowering accommodation standards may thus have paved the way for developments towards more closed forms of accommodation, such as the recent ANKER-centres in Germany (Schader et al., 2018). It is thus of utmost importance to not only analyse carceral spaces in themselves, but also to compare different types of carceral spaces and how they reinforce and legitimize conditions of insecurity and separation in societies.

Finally, this paper argues that while it is crucial to recognize carceral spaces’ tendencies towards material, institutional and moral closure, it is equally important to take account of openings, agency and resistances to closure. Both case studies presented in this paper exhibit how asylum seekers and local residents were not purely victims of a politics of discomfort, but actively pushed against it to regain a sense of comfort. Affect mobilized forms of agency to challenge discomfort, as asylum seekers and local residents took control over contaminated facilities or created temporary and more permanent spaces of encounter inside or near the two centres, thereby providing opportunities for familiarization. These findings are indicative of the wider tensions between national deterrence policies and local migration policymaking (Caponio & Borkert, 2010), but also reveal how these tensions play out in one and

the same space, resulting in different degrees of comfort and discomfort existing alongside each other. A stronger focus on how a politics of discomfort is produced, experienced as well as resisted by all parts of society could enrich understandings of the affective politics of asylum and help devise policies that contribute to a real sense of security.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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