

“Here you get a little extra push”: The meaning of architectural quality in housing for the formerly homeless – a case study of Veiskillet in Trondheim, Norway

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Abstract:

The paper presents a case study of a housing project where special attention was paid to the use of architectural qualities to positively affect a user group of former criminals and drug addicts. The aim of the study is to examine the residents' experience of these qualities, and the meaning this had for their identity and in providing motivation for change. The study shows that the user group appreciates and takes extra care of quality materials and architecture, and that these qualities have an impact on identity. The physical environment contributed to strengthening and motivating some residents in their new identity as non-criminals / non-drug addicts. An appealing

housing situation may thus be an important contribution to motivation for change, due to environmental characteristics that symbolize a positive social identity. This contribution is however dynamic, and dependent on other situational factors as well.

Keywords:

Architectural quality, social / public housing, homeless, home, identity

INTRODUCTION

A formerly homeless person told a Norwegian newspaper (Okkenhaug, 2006) that the barracks the municipality provided him took the spark of life out of him. The 22-year old lost his temper and set fire to the barracks he was living in while waiting for a better permanent apartment. "I couldn't stand living in such a degrading way", he said to the journalist. This incident illustrates that a roof above one's head is not enough, and that environmental design, location and the associations tied to a dwelling matters. The impact of the physical environment has been poorly examined in regards to housing for the homeless. People who are unable to hold on to a dwelling of their own are often assigned low status housing. How does this affect their identity, and their motivation to change their lives, away from crime or drug abuse? Is it possible to use a dwelling as a strategy to positively affect a person's sense of dignity?

The present study is a single in-depth case study of a housing project called "Veiskillet" in Trondheim, with the focus on the residents' experience of its architectural qualities. Interviews with one of the initiators, the two employees and the residents have been undertaken to learn about their experience of living and working in a building designed with special architectural quality particularly to support the development a new identity for its residents, as non-criminals / non-drug abusers. A presentation and discussion of the architectural characteristics and qualities are based on the authors' on-site inspections of the building as well as a professional evaluation undertaken by the jury of Norwegian State award for building tradition 2007. An understanding of the architect's intentions and ideas are drawn from his own presentations of the project in architectural magazines, and from interviews with him in newspaper articles. The study will focus on the residents' experience of the environment in relation to their self-identity, future expectations, and motivation for change. The study gives less attention on the evaluation of practical details. Social and organizational factors are considered in the interpretation of the results, but will be described only briefly to give the reader a broader picture of the context. The findings in the present study may be relevant for other groups of people in the public housing sector as well. The perspective taken in this study is that the physical environment may be a strategic instrument in counteracting

social exclusion of former homeless criminals and drug addicts.

Homelessness and public housing

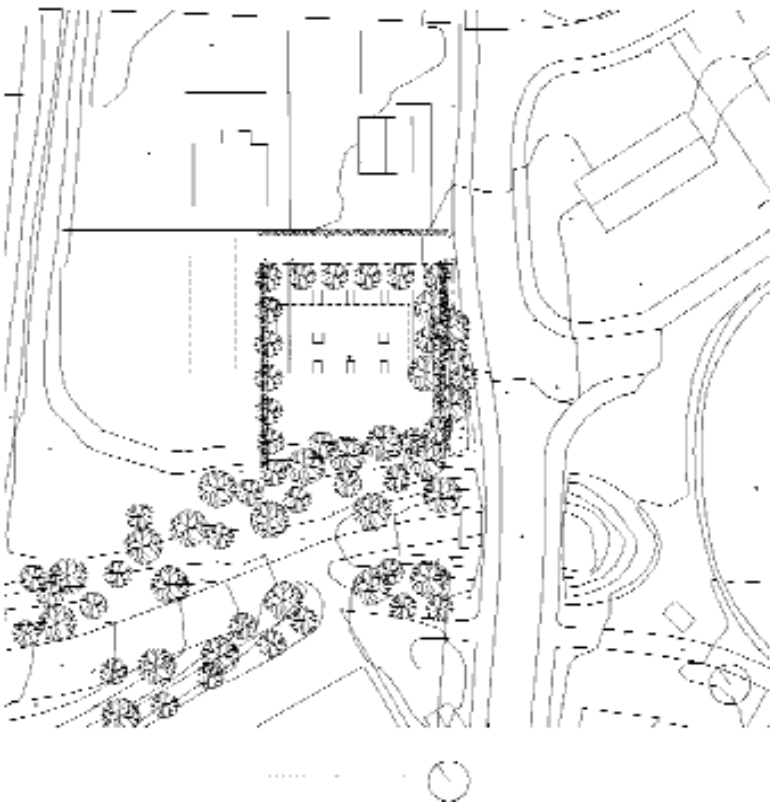
Homeless people with a life history involving drugs and crime as well as mental illness are often offered low quality housing from a technical, functional and aesthetic perspective; simply stated, this is the kind of housing that other people do not want. The location of the housing is often also problematic, located as it is in surroundings where it can be difficult to get on with ordinary life. Many homeless even prefer the streets before hostels or other forms of temporary accommodation, mostly because of the fear of living with people who take drugs and lead chaotic lifestyles (Hutson, 1999, Clapham, 2005). Research on public housing seldom examines how low quality housing affects a resident's view of herself / himself. There is, however, research that demonstrates how upgraded neighbourhoods and housing units may be related to increased well-being among the residents (Wright & Kloos, 2007).

Home and identity

Housing can be seen from a symbolic interactionist perspective. People express themselves and perceive others not only through their behaviour or verbal statements, but also through possessions and physical environments. People's belongings and environments carry meanings that are interpreted during social interaction (Goffman, 1959). The dwelling is a long-term possession with personal content; it therefore constitutes a potentially important personal symbol. A dwelling can be seen as an expression of identity, both for oneself and others. Our own dwellings and neighbourhoods influence self-concepts about who we are (Gifford, 2002; Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983). Hauge & Kolstad (2007) found that people experience their dwellings as providing others information about personality and taste, interests, life phase, social status, and relationships. Speller et al. (2002) have documented how people's identities are affected by changes in their spatial environment. The associational content of environmental identity signals are, however, under constant negotiation through social interaction, and tend to change over time and differ among groups. Physical environments affect identity, not only through visual impressions, but also through how they facilitate the development of social networks, one's private life, and control over one's own life situation.

Identity, defined as a sense of who we are as individuals, is both about what makes us similar to other people, and what makes us different. People structure their perception of themselves and others by means of social categories, which then become aspects of their self-concepts (Tajfel, 1981, 1982). Social identity has been explained by Tajfel (1981) as the individual's knowledge of belonging to certain social groups, in addition to the emotions and values created by or associated with membership in the group. Social identity theory can be further developed to include aspects of places, objects or neighbourhoods (Hauge, 2007; Twigger-Ross, et al., 2003). A place or neighbourhood can be seen as a social entity or "membership group" that provides identity. A particular neighbourhood is often associated with a certain lifestyle and social status. In the same way, objects or types of environments are also associated with different groups of people. In relation to maintaining positive self-esteem, this means that people will prefer places and physical symbols that maintain and enhance positive self-esteem, and, if they are able, avoid places that have a negative impact on their self-esteem (Twigger-Ross, et al., 2003).

Site plan



CASE

To better understand the context of "Veiskillet", a few words on the Norwegian Housing policy towards socially vulnerable groups are needed. Only 4% of the Norwegian housing stock is publicly owned (Hansen, 2006) and can be categorized as social housing. Public support for vulnerable groups is given through individually directed instruments rather than provision of subsidized housing. Public housing is reserved for the worst off, socially as well as economically. Based on an ideology of integration of vulnerable groups in ordinary neighbourhoods instead of allocating them socially and physically separate areas or buildings, municipalities buy apartments in housing cooperatives for social clients.

Veiskillet

The Church City Mission is an organization that works in the cities to prevent poverty and loneliness. The Mission wanted to create a living environment for 5-6 young people with a history of drug abuse and crime who wanted a fresh start. The aim was to be able to provide a home, not an institution for these individuals that included both privacy and community. The planning process did not include direct user participation, but the Mission based their ideas on their experiences from years of work and talking to the homeless, drug abusers and prisoners. The Oslo-based architect Bård Helland was engaged to design the project.

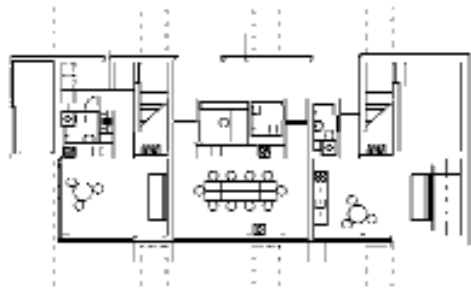
The housing is situated on the border of a housing area, 5-6 km away from the city centre, in Trondheim's Moholt neighbourhood. It has six apartments, with the four largest (40 m²) on the first floor, and two smaller (30 m²) on the ground floor. Each apartment appears to be an individual unit. Each unit has a rectangular floor plan (3.2 x 12.5 m) with glass end walls, and with a ceiling height of 2.6 m. The kitchen and living room open towards the south, while the bedroom faces the neighbouring detached houses towards the north. The bedroom has a bamboo screen covering the large windows, which still allows the light to shine through.

The ground floor features a common entrance, an office, a technical room and a common kitchen / living room with access to a common garden. The building has a timber frame construction, outer wood panelling, and sheathing that is painted black. The interiors of the private apartments were painted in lighter colours. Oak parquet and concrete was used for inner

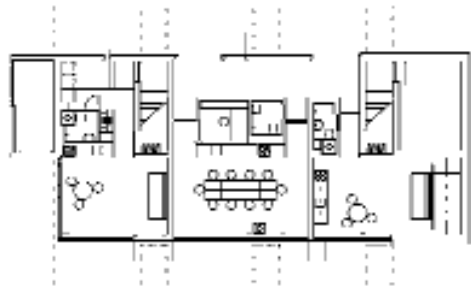
floors. The architecture has a severe and minimalist expression both outside and inside, distinguished by a high degree of consistency in detailing.

The project was built with a small budget, but extra money was spent on selected elements and materials, such as the entrance door, which was covered in a polished brass sheet. For more details on costs and technical solutions, see Helland (2006, 2007). Veiskillet was financed through loans and contributions from the Norwegian State Housing Bank, a loan contract with Trondheim Red Cross, and earmarked transfers from the Church City Mission.

“Veiskillet” means “crossroad” in Norwegian, a name that fits both the location and the intentions of the project; helping the residents in starting over and breaking away from destructive life patterns. In co-operation with the municipality’s social services, the housing employees make sure that the residents have daily activities, such as work training, studies or sport (the bus connections are good). The primary target group is men and women between 25 and 40 years old who have recently been released from prison. Veiskillet is a “high threshold offer”, meaning that the housing offer comes with a demand that residents are motivated and show a willingness to change. The intention is that the residents are followed closely, and are given a fair chance to start over again without drugs and crime. Their motivation is evaluated over time, and if they fail to show any effort to change, they risk having to move. Two social workers are employed in a 150% position at the house. They



Ground floor

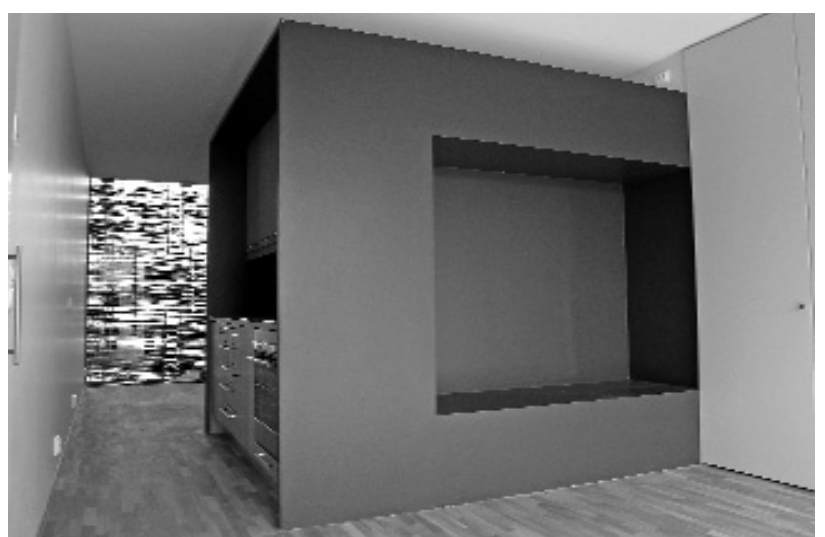


First floor

are present only at daytime. By the summer of 2007, five of the apartments were occupied. The residents have furnished and decorated their apartments themselves.

Veiskillet differs from most other housing projects for the homeless due to its architectural characteristics. It is also very different from the detached houses in the surrounding neighbourhood. It has received a lot of attention in the media and also among professionals, most of which has been very positive, although it may be assumed that opinions among neighbours and the more general public are diverse.

Photos showing the interior. Ground floor apartment to the left and first floor to the right. (Photo: Bård Helland)





Garden and entrance side.
(Photo: Bård Helland)

Veiskillet was one of many dwellings evaluated for Norwegian State award for building tradition 2007, and was one of four projects that was awarded honourable mention. The jury gave Veiskillet an honourable mention for: "Superior architecture and exemplary architectural quality and adjustment to users who probably have experienced anything but being prioritized and valued. The building has clear qualities as a possible design icon. The apartments are oriented and designed with great insight and respect for the users' particular challenges and life situations. Details are designed with care, both functionally and aesthetically. Beautiful common areas establish a sense of warmth and belongingness for users and their relations. The jury's honourable mention particularly recognizes the architectural nerve throughout the structure, which combines sound and attractive housing qualities that are necessary regardless of the type of resident. The architect's insight and respect for the users are great examples for the housing sector in general." (Norwegian State award for building tradition 2007 / Statens byggeskikkspris, 2007, author's translation)

METHOD

A case study allows researchers to conduct an in-depth exploration of a phenomenon and to examine it from different angles and methodological perspectives. A common reason for doing a single case study is that it is a "rare and unique case" (Yin, 2003), which certainly applies to Veiskillet. There is knowledge to be found through this case that could not have been found elsewhere. The results from building inspections, media publicity, and interviews may complement each other. The results can be generalized analytically, through com-



paring different aspects to other housing contexts for vulnerable groups of people.

Interviews

The interviews with one of the initiators and the two employees at Veiskillet were conducted as a group interview in the common area in Veiskillet. Information about the experience of living at Veiskillet was collected through in-depth interviews with the users. These interviews were conducted by fourth year psychology students as research training. Before the interviews, all residents received information about the research project, ethical guidelines, and a consent statement. Four of five residents agreed to be interviewed. The interviews were conducted in March 2007. The resident interview guide covered five main topics: The residents' former and present life situation, functionality, aesthetics, the meaning of living at Veiskillet, related to identity and motivation for change, and evaluation of rules, and offers. The questions were made open-ended, and topics were discussed as they cropped up naturally in the conversation. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

In accordance with the tradition of research on the meaning of home, a phenomenological approach was chosen (Altman & Low, 1992; Gifford, 2002). The analytical framework drew broadly on *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)* (Smith & Osborn, 2004), which allows more focus on context and interpretation than standard phenomenology. IPA attempts to explore an individual's personal perception of a phenomenon, but at the same time emphasizes the research process as dynamic and the role of the researcher as active. What the informants verbally expressed was analy-



Entrance and window screen.
(Photos: Bård Helland)

sed in relation to context. Each interview was read, divided into themes, and the informants' opinions were categorized within each topic.

Informants - residents

All four residents are men between 30 and 45 years old, and have a background of drug use, crime and prison. Three have from time to time been homeless. All have experienced living in several institutions and different kinds of social housing. The results revealed that the residents' experience of the architecture was dependent on their individual life situation, and therefore a short summary of their current situation is provided here, together with fictitious names:

John – his child visits him every day, and he maintains good contact with the son's mother. He is searching for a job, and had lived at Veiskillet for three weeks when the interviews were conducted. Enthusiastic about his housing situation.

Peter – his child visits him often, he maintains good contact with his parents. He works for the municipality and had lived at Veiskillet for two years when the interviews were conducted. He feels positive about his housing situation.

David – has some contact with his parents, works in an institution for drug abusers, has plans to study, had lived at Veiskillet for a year when the interviews were conducted. He has the smallest apartment. Enthusiastic about his housing situation.

Kevin – has regular contact with one of his parents, is at a municipal activity centre each day, had lived at Veiskillet for one-and-a-half years when the interviews were conducted. Due to lack of motivation to change his drug behaviour over time, he was asked to move out only a few weeks after this interview was conducted. Satisfied with his housing situation,

but indifferent towards Veiskillet compared to other housing possibilities.

Due to low quality recording, two of the interviews could not be fully transcribed, but the interviewers have written reports of these two interviews. Only the interviews with John and David were fully recorded, therefore, the quotations are taken from just these two interviews. However, the two other interviews have been equally important in the analysis of the results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

General satisfaction

Over the years, Veiskillet's project initiators and its employees had seen many drug- and alcohol abusers who were motivated to change their lifestyles give up because they were placed in housing that made it very difficult to get away from the drug environment. Therefore this housing project was situated away from the city centre in an ordinary housing area. Three of the informants, but not Kevin, really appreciated the housing's location away from downtown and associated meeting places for drug addicts.

Yes, I think it's a perfect location. If it had been down in the city centre, it's just a short hop to get drugs. Up here we have everything we need, really. In fact, I know for myself if we lived nearer to the centre, if you were a little bored at home, it would have been much easier to go downtown, get yourself a beer, and then from there it's all downhill. And if you think that everyone else who lives here is pretty well known in the drug scene, you can imagine how wild it could have gotten. So it's really quite good to be up here, absolutely (David).

The housing project is in general talked about in a very positive manner, both by employees and residents. The residents are all satisfied with the housing situation. Everyone feels that it is a safe place. This makes it easier for residents to maintain contact with their own children and family.

John: I love it. You really feel good coming home. (...) It's really a nice place to come home to. It's quiet and calm here. It's not like I'm on my way home, and maybe I've got my son with me and I have to wonder, "What kind of condition is the house going to be in when I get home now?"

Interviewer: How long do you plan to live here?

John: Oh, years, maybe. It's a really great place to live while you're working through the kinds of issues that I'm working through. It's both because of the living situation and the building itself. I don't think I could have found a better place to live in this situation.

Residents really liked the garden, and they would like to use it more than they actually do. The employees also perceived the garden as important, planted as a garden should be; they described it as a symbolic statement that this is a proper home. The residents also appreciated the common living room, and having someone to talk to, both other residents and employees.

All informants expressed the feeling that having certain rules gave them a sense of safety. At the same time, they disagreed on how strict these rules should be. Three of the residents actually thought the enforcement of these rules could have been stricter, especially with respect to drugs. Kevin had a different attitude; he thinks the rules limit his freedom of choice. He saw Veiskillet as just another

institution, was less enthusiastic about the housing situation, and described it as just "okay". The other three residents described Veiskillet as something very special, not like any other ordinary institution. They seemed to a greater extent to appreciate the specific qualifications that come with living here. The difference in attitudes may reflect the residents' differing emotions as affected by their failures and hopes for the future, and different levels of maturity in the residents' insight into their own drug problems.

Architecture

The project initiators' request to the architect was vague. He therefore had great freedom in interpreting their intentions and translating them into architectural form. One of the initiators described the process as long and complicated, but inspiring. It made the initiators more aware of the meaning of the environment, and forced them to reflect in more detail about the intentions behind the house. One of the initiators said, "without the process with the architect, the intentions behind the house would not have been as thought through as they are now". He described the architect as a man who got the project "under his skin", and "put his soul into it". The employees described the residents as overwhelmed when they entered the building for the first time. They seemed to truly enjoy the design, materials and colours at Veiskillet:

I think this is absolutely brilliant! I am totally happy with this place! (David)

What details were especially appreciated? Two of the residents seemed especially interested in the design of the house. They spoke enthusiastically about the large windows that bright-

*Common living room to the left.
Garden / outdoor areas.
(Photo: Bård Helland).*



ned the black painted roofs, and gave elegant contrasts. The oak parquet was described as beautiful. The use of brushed steel and brass was noted and appreciated as well. The front door was covered in brass, due to the architect's emphasis on creating a strong first impression of the house. One of the residents put it this way:

It's great and solid! I've worked a little bit with metal before, so... I just dig it, I dig steel and brass and stuff like that. It's so absolutely fine. *(John)*

Veiskillet has floor-to-ceiling windows, something that can be perceived as both strange and threatening for former drug abusers and criminals who are in fact used to hiding. The architect described his intentions with the large windows as a "starting point"; the windows gave residents the ability to vary light and openness with curtains and blinds based on their mood and the time of day. But the win-

dows should give residents the ability to experience the freedom that large windows symbolize, compared to the small peephole of light in prison (Helland, 2006, 2007). Kevin and Peter are indifferent to the large windows, and keep the curtains drawn. John and David were in fact very pleased with the windows, and seemed to be inspired by the architect's symbolic idea of "living openly":

As a drug abuser, you're used to shutting out the world as much as possible. And then I came here and had a whole wall as a window! But those are old thoughts. Now I'm not a drug abuser in that sense, anyway, so it's really nice to let the light in. Yup, that's it, but it's a change that you have to make in yourself, isn't it. *(David)*

Three of the informants spoke positively about the special design of the entrance, but Kevin experienced the entrance, especially the hall, as small, tight and dark, something that

*Entrance façade with door covered in brass.
(Photo: Bård Helland)*





Windows, living room, first floor.
 (Photo to the left: Bård Helland.
 Photo to the right: Karine Denizoe)

reminds him of prison. This contrasting sense of the entryway may be related to the strict minimalist style the architect has chosen, and is a reminder to planners and architects that this user group may have different associations with the environment than other people.

The residents' personal styles were very different from what the style of the building might suggest, but they all seemed to have found opportunities to express their own style. Peter said that to live in a place was, for him, not dependent on living in a house that was modern and stylish. He described his personal style as more cosy and lived-in, and exemplified this with pine furniture and warm colours. Most of the residents kept their apartment neat



and clean, according to the employees. John mentioned the significance of having an appealing dwelling in making it easy to settle down somewhere after a period in prison:

It's always difficult in the beginning, all of a sudden released and ... like you're just put in a place and, OK, here's your new home. But you have to go through that feeling at first, anyway. But here it's really inviting, and when I got going and got to move my stuff in, I settled down pretty quickly. (John)

Kevin was more indifferent than the others about living at Veiskillet. He did not care about design and aesthetics. These aspects were not important for him in order to create a home. A possible explanation for this is that not every-



Windows and interior, living room,
 ground floor.
 (Photo: Mette Møller)



ne is equally interested in aesthetics. The employees, however, described Kevin as very enthusiastic about the architecture at Veiskillet in the beginning, so his views on the building seem to have changed along with his increasing drug problems. He also knew he risked being asked to move out at the time of the interview. This shows that the associations that we make with objects and architecture are dynamic, and under constant negotiation due to social interaction. Social and situational factors have an impact if we experience a building as pleasant. Kevin might have associated this building with defeat, in contrast to the positive future hopes he connected it with when he first moved in. It is difficult to separate social and physical factors when evaluating a housing project. The physical environment can be linked to symbols and associations related to personal experiences, relationships and future hopes. The meaning of an appealing physical environment is dependent on other factors (personal resources, the social environment, and situational factors) in a given situation.

The employees at Veiskillet have seen that residents appreciate and take care of the environment; quality materials have been looked after and kept nice. They had been worried that there would be damage done to the house, and

were surprised by how well the residents looked after the environs. There have been a few incidents, however, where one of the residents did minor damage to the interior of his apartment when he was intoxicated. The architect has chosen materials that are suited to easy renovation and repair; oak parquet may be refinished, and the painted indoor surfaces may be repainted (Helland, 2007). One of the informants talked about how it was important to take extra care of the house and its environs because it is so pleasant. The physical environment at Veiskillet was built in a way that inspires residents to care for it:

This building, it inspires you to take care of it. There's no graffiti on the walls here, or other things like that. It's so nice here that that sort of thing would just ruin it. *(John)*

One of the residents told a journalist that he felt that this housing project was something different, a house that you had to respect. He stated, "nothing here is done halfway. And nothing is broken. Notice that!" (Ørslie, 2006, p 9). These results show that a user group of former homeless, struggling to break away their past of crime and drug abuse, can appreciate and take care of architectural qualities. The ability to generalize the results must be

*Hall to the left. Apartment first floor, towards living room to the right.
(Photos: Mette Møller)*

seen in relation to the present study's user group; the residents at Veiskillet are well-functioning individuals, and are highly motivated to change away from their former lives of drug abuse and crime. The fact that there are employees in the building all day may also affect how well kept the environment is. Nevertheless, the results give reason to believe that these residents are taking better care of their environment in this housing project than they would have done in a poor apartment in a bad neighbourhood. The architect stated in a newspaper article that the house construction budget was quite low, but that some aspects were prioritized because they wanted a certain "power" in the standard, solutions that required a *decent user* (Ørslie, 2006). It appears that the residents have experienced these requirements through their built environment. For the third resident it also represented a positive factor, while the last resident was indifferent. Change of behaviour is not a realistic goal for some groups of drug or alcohol abusers. However, well-being and quality of life for some residents may be increased by housing and environments the users find appealing.

Identity and motivation for change

One of the initiators of Veiskillet described his faith in the physical environment as a "factor x" that affects a resident's quality of life and view of himself: Drug abusers are used to miserable housing. Living in a poor apartment probably consolidates the parts of one's identity that has to do with drugs, while the opposite may also be true; an attractive apartment may consolidate the parts of one's identity that affect motivation for change. Does this building affect the informants' identity? It is very clear that the residents experienced the apartments as their home, regardless of their interest in the architecture. The architecture also seemed to have an effect on how two of the residents thought about themselves and their lives. David is very aware of the connection between a nice dwelling, quality of life and motivation for change. He says:

... because it's a quality of life issue, isn't it, it's easy to think: If this place had been a rundown dump, your quality of life would have just gone to hell, quite simply. So here you get a little extra push. (David)

He felt that the design and facilities at Veiskillet contributed to provide a little extra energy for change. John told that he became

motivated to change his life while in prison, but living at Veiskillet made it easier to keep up the motivation and to think positively about the future:

Yes, I was motivated before I moved here. Living here just means that I have to keep going. Living here makes it easier to think about the future, and to be positive -- it does. Also for me, the design of the building matters. In jail, the colours... you feel like you're really locked up. It's not like that here. It's really nice... the Chinese call it Feng Shui: you always get good vibes being here. That kind of stuff is pretty important, I think. It's true for colours, it's true for the light -- everything. (John)

Specific details in the apartments, such as the large windows, also take on symbolic content and are used as examples to contrast with how drug abusers live. In an earlier quotation, David described the positive associations the large windows gave him, and the adjustment he had made in his self-image to get used to the large windows and let the light in. This example shows that the symbolic content of large windows is related to a social identity (Tajfel, 1981, 1982) as a drug-free person. As Twigger-Ross et al., (2003) point out, objects and environments function as symbols of different social identities. The informant recognized large windows as a symbol of a social identity as a non drug abuser, and used this change in the process of moving from a social identity as a drug abuser to a social identity as drug-free. The environment contributed to consolidate a new identity as a *former* drug abuser. But it was not only the symbolic content of specific details / objects in the interior that contributed to an identity change, but the housing situation in general that mattered. The informants reflected on the large difference between the housing situation before and now. They have lived in many degrading places. The housing situation at Veiskillet was a great contrast to former housing situations:

David: Plus we've experienced so many run-down places. I just think about what it might look like where I lived before. So the difference between that and this place is just night and day, absolutely.

Interviewer: Do you think that people would perceive you differently now that you have moved here?

David: Yes, I think so. My mother, for example, is proud of me!

In general, people often associate appealing environments with important people. The visual

impression is often the first impression we get of a person and a situation, and it has an impact on the evaluation of the qualities and capacities we attribute to these individuals. The associations the environment gives come from experience and knowledge. We have experienced a connection between a certain type of people, and a certain type of environment that results in prejudices we seek to confirm. Nasar (1998) believe there are certain basic qualities that people in general experience as positive, for example order, upkeep and openness. The last quotation about a resident's experience of an extra-proud mother, shows that family and friends may look differently at a resident when they live in housing that provides hope and positive associations. This may contribute to encouraging a user to hold on to a new social identity as drug- and crime-free. Our cognitions, emotions and behaviour are context dependent, and high quality housing has an impact on the way others look at us, and the way we evaluate ourselves. However, this user group has not always had good experiences with people in positions of power, something that may result in associations that are different from what most people associate with appealing housing situations. A group of former drug abusers, homeless and criminals may be examples of groups that make different associations with physical environments than others might.

The employees' impression was that the users are very proud of moving into these small apartments. Since there are only six apartments, there is a real feeling of exclusivity in being allowed to live in one of them. The building is not very exclusive in terms of costs, but money has been spent on some central aspects, to give residents a feeling that a real effort was made in the design process (Helland, 2007). The users also like the attention the building has received in national media and architectural magazines. They stated that this makes it even more attractive to live here. Seen from a symbolic interactionist perspective, the attention the housing project has been given in the media, and also through this research project, contributes to give the building an even more positive symbolic content (Goffman, 1959). This "image-building" strengthens the positive associations the residents have with their home. The residents did not seem to be afraid to "stand out" by living in a house that "stands out" from other houses, - "maybe because they finally 'stand out' in a positive

manner?". One of the project initiators wonders. For the first time in their lives, the residents have the experience of not being embarrassed by their housing situation:

I'm not embarrassed to have people come visit, not at all! I think it's completely fine to show people how I'm doing now! (David)

My mother and stepfather haven't been here to take a look yet, so I'll be really happy to have them come for a visit! (...) A friend of mine is really interested in design and things like that. She works in an advertising agency and she was completely... well, she thought it was so cool here, yeah! (John)

There is a close connection between social life and physical environments. When the environment makes you proud, it may affect your desire to host visitors. This may lead to more positive social contacts than in a run-down dwelling. As already stated, John said that the building feels like a safe place to bring his son to, and the environment and location in this way strengthen his focus on an identity as a father. The employees also described what great pleasure they get from having outsiders so interested in their workplace. One of the employees emphasised the joy of being able to offer apartments he was proud of, compared to other institutions he has worked in. The employees' pride in the environment may also be a contributor to a positive environment in the housing project, thereby affecting the residents' well-being and motivation to change.

CONCLUSIONS

The housing project presented here meets the residents' needs to a great extent, the building was mostly seen in a positive manner. The results show that former homeless people, struggling to escape a life of crime and drug abuse, may appreciate and take care of architectural qualities and decent materials in a collective living situation. Some were very enthusiastic about the design of the house, and details in layout were noticed and valued. Others were more indifferent to the architecture, and were instead affected by other contextual and situational factors. The safety of the housing situation and the architectural qualities also affected some of the users' pride in living in this place, and made them look forward to having visitors. The study shows that the physical environment can be a part of the

process of consolidating a new identity for some former criminals and drug abusers. Living with this special design and architecture gave two of the residents the extra push they needed in their struggle to escape from drugs and crime. For the other two informants, the architecture was not that prominent in building a new identity.

There is a risk that the results in this research project have been affected by the "image building of the house" that the media publicity has led to, and the research interest these residents are exposed to. Positive information may affect people's evaluation of objects and environments. Money may be invested in physical improvements, but efforts to promote a neighbourhood and to change public opinion are neglected. "Image building" may be an important part of planning for social housing. Interviews with neighbours could also provide more insights into how architectural and situational factors influence public attitudes towards former criminals and drug abusers.

This is a small case study, and more data is needed to draw general conclusions. Comparison between different types of public housing is needed. The importance of architecture and different physical elements (windows, materials, colours, detailing etc), and in what way situational factors affect the meaning of these elements, also require further in-depth analysis. Further research should also com-

pare the effect of the physical environment to organizational and social factors for well-being and change in this user group. A longitudinal study would detect whether environmental qualities are of relevance in the actual changing of behaviour in criminals and drug abusers. It is important, however, to keep in mind how difficult it is for drug- and alcohol-abusers to change behaviour. More focus should be given to how quality environments may contribute to increased well-being and quality of life, in the absence of a demand for behavioural change.

Quality housing may strengthen a message about inclusion, safety, tolerance and control. A run-down apartment in a bad neighbourhood sends the opposite signal about dignity. However, as this study has shown, architecture that is appealing and meaningful to some residents may be seen with indifference or even associated with failure by other residents. The physical environment is just one of many factors that may contribute to increased well-being among people who from different reasons fall outside society. The associations that objects and environments create in people's minds are not established once and for all, but instead are under constant negotiation, dependent on other situational factors. Well-being is the sum of many contextual variables. The symbolism in the environment is one of many ways of strengthening the message about a resident's value and self-worth: Someone cares.

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