Persons Entitled to Asylum Create their Own Living Space – Conditions for a Successful Implementation in Rural Areas in Austria

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Abstract. The exodus from rural areas and subsequent migration into cities results in vacated housing and infrastructure substance, leaving behind valuable assets from a resource as well as building-heritage point of view. At the same time thousands of persons entitled to asylum are distributed on a quota-based and highly regulatory approach over the Austrian municipalities. From a spatial planning as well as from an architectural position, this raises several questions, which have been addressed in a research project funded under the Austrian Ministry of Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs: (1) Can persons entitled to asylum be involved in the upgrading and refurbishment of vacant buildings with the purpose of creating their own living spaces? If so, which conditions are necessary for a successful cooperation? (Strategic point of view). (2) Which requirements must potentially adequate empty buildings fulfil in order to be suitable for this purpose? What are the relevant criteria related to building structure, location and infrastructure in this context? (Object-related point of view). (3) What would be the underlying business model based on a cooperation between local small and medium sized enterprises and persons entitled to asylum? (Economic point of view). The purpose of this paper is to present the different approaches of spatial planning and architecture, resulting in a subsequent common methodological approximation towards the joint topics of rural exodus, conservation of building stock and living space for persons entitled to asylum. Due to the sensitivity of the topic of migration and the complexity of the associated framework conditions, the assessment has been limited to an exemplary case study of a single rural municipality in Austria. The empirical results support the following findings: (1) Persons entitled to asylum are not perceived as a potential target group by the real estate market. (2) The requirements of local companies involved in building refurbishment actions do not match the potential of persons entitled to asylum, both from a quantitative as well as qualitative point of view. (3) The concept of matching rural vacancy and subsequent upgrading as well as refurbishment of buildings and the renewal of village centres in cooperation with persons entitled to asylum is currently not supported by the present legal framework conditions. Developing effective synergies between persons entitled to asylum creating their own living spaces and the declining rural population and subsequent building vacancy in rural Austria necessitates a viable legal, infrastructure related and market driven framework.
1. Introduction
By the end of 2016 65.6 million people have been forced from their homes, among them are nearly 22.5 million refugees, who flee conflict and war in their home countries [1]. Due to the migration crisis in 2015, 88,340 people requested asylum in Austria in this year, compared to an average of around 17,000 in the ten years preceding 2015 [2]. For these people, adequate accommodation must be provided. The “primary care” system grants asylum seekers food, health care and accommodation, but there is no freedom of choice for the place of residence [3]. Those, whose application for asylum has been turned into an “entitlement for asylum”, gain the right to work and reside in Austria for a limited period of time (currently three years). However, this also means they do no longer receive benefits from “primary care” and thus need to find their own accommodation. Especially those people already entitled to asylum need a medium to long-term perspective in terms of a new home, which goes beyond the requirements of safety and shelter. From a spatial and socio-economic perspective, a somewhat even distribution across the Austrian municipalities might be preferable compared to spatial concentration. However, due to factors mainly related to infrastructure, job market opportunities and docking at existing social networks, there is a tendency for persons entitled to asylum to rather settle in densely populated urban areas. [4]. Following the worldwide trend in an increasing number of people moving into cities, within the last decade, the population of Vienna, Austria’s capital and largest city, has on an annual basis increased by over 20,000 inhabitants, whilst the disadvantaged, structurally weak rural areas in Upper Styria, Upper Carinthia and the Northern area of Lower Austria face severe population decline [5]. The increased internal migration from rural municipalities into cities – especially among young adults [6], leads to housing vacancy and – subsequently – often to dereliction of infrastructure. From an architectural as well as building-heritage and resource-related point of view there are valuable infrastructure assets, which are left behind and cannot be optimized for future uses.

Bringing these aspects together raises the question if synergies between the need of adequate housing for an increasingly larger population group of persons entitled to asylum on the one hand and the opportunity to renew derelict building stock in municipalities, which are faced with a decreasing number of inhabitants, on the other hand, could be exploited. Providing persons entitled to asylum the opportunity to enter the job market with skills suitable for the refurbishment of buildings could be an additional asset. Within this context, the following research questions have been addressed in a research project funded by the Austrian Ministry of Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs:

- Can persons entitled to asylum be involved in the upgrading and refurbishment of vacant buildings in order to create their own living spaces? If so, which conditions are necessary for a successful cooperation? (Strategic point of view).
- Which requirements must the potential empty buildings fulfil in order to be suitable for this purpose? What are the relevant criteria related to building structure, location and infrastructure in this context? (Object-related point of view).
- Which business model is appropriate to underline the cooperation between local small and medium sized enterprises and persons entitled to asylum? (Economic point of view).

2. Methodology
The above defined research questions have been addressed in an interdisciplinary research project. The project team, consisting of spatial planners, architects and real-estate specialists, decided on the following approach: First, three to five Austrian rural municipalities, which should act as adequate case studies should be selected based on the criteria of (1) high share of persons entitled to asylum related to the residential population, (2) good public transport conditions, (3) located in Lower Austria within close proximity to Vienna and (4) availability of potentially adequate vacant building objects for refurbishment. In a second step, potential currently vacant buildings should be identified and assessed whether those real estate objects would be suitable to be converted into adequate housing for persons entitled to asylum or not. The assessment was supported by a criteria catalogue, which defines the key criteria for the selection process based on a thorough analysis of the needs and requirements of the target group. Finally, the third step should comprise of a feasibility study in order to assess the
economical and legal aspects related to the refurbishment process, the change in property value and the cooperation between persons entitled to asylum and small sized enterprises within the vicinity of the municipality.

2.1. Selection of suitable municipalities
Due to the lack of municipality-related information on persons entitled to asylum, the very limited readiness of the municipalities to participate in the project and the misjudgement of the migration behaviour of persons entitled to asylum, an indicator-based pre-selection of potential rural case study municipalities was impossible.

That is why the acquisition of suitable rural municipalities was extended to the whole of Austria. On the one hand, the focus was on municipalities that do outstanding refugee work; on the other hand, contact was sought with various gatekeepers – amongst others, former project partners of the research team, experts within the field of rural development and the Austrian Association of Municipalities.

7 out of 20 municipalities contacted by the research team gave a response. Finally, one single rural municipality in the North-Eastern area of Lower Austria was gained in order to act as a case example.

2.2. Criteria catalogue and building case studies
One of the key aspects of the study was to define a set of criteria in order to support regional and local stakeholders in the selection of existing buildings, which can provide a suitable medium to long-term home for persons entitled to asylum in communities that are facing a declining population and subsequent vacant building stock. On a general level several factors influence the decision of either refurbishing or demolishing an existing building structure. Table 1 summarizes the main supporting and hindering factors in this context.

| Supporting factors | Hindering factors |
|--------------------|-------------------|
| Favourable location of the property | Unfavourable location of the property |
| Good condition of the building structure | Bad condition of the building structure (e.g. damp walls, structure deficiencies) |
| High historical value of the building | Low historical value of the building |
| Adequate day-lighting conditions, room-height and barrier-free access | Small rooms with low ceiling heights and limited day-lighting |
| Floor plan can be easily adapted to new use | Rigid floor plan with limited potential for adaptations |
| Potential for building extension | No extensions possible |
| Building can stay occupied during construction | Building must be evacuated during construction |
| No costs for new building structure (structure can be maintained) | No clear assessment of potential refurbishment costs can be made |
| No demolition and disposal costs | Additional costs due to required building and structural assessments |
| Overall cost savings of refurbishment compared to new construction | New construction is more economical |

Following the general assessment of either refurbishment or demolition, there are a series of pre-requisites, which make a building in addition either suitable or not suitable for providing a home for
persons entitled to asylum. The accommodation must meet certain qualities and minimum requirements for the location of the building and the building as such.

| GROUP                        | CRITERIA                                      | SUB-CRITERIA                              | WEIGHTING FACTOR |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|------------------|
| MACRO-LEVEL                  | Unemployment rate                            | 12,5%                                     |                 |
|                              | Job market                                    | 15,0%                                     |                 |
|                              | Long-distance transport infrastructure         | 30,0%                                     | 40,0%           |
|                              | Travel time of public transport to nearest city| 30,0%                                     |                 |
|                              | Political / societal approach towards target group | 12,5%                                     |                 |
|                              | Connection to public transport                |                                           |                 |
|                              | Distance to the next stop                     | 8,5%                                      |                 |
|                              | Intervals of public transport                 | 5,5%                                      |                 |
|                              | Travel times of public transport to the nearest city centre | 5,5%                                      |                 |
|                              | Distance to local supply infrastructure       |                                           |                 |
|                              | Shopping for daily needs                      | 8,5%                                      |                 |
|                              | Local restaurants and coffee shops            | 1,5%                                      |                 |
|                              | Post office and bank                          | 1,5%                                      |                 |
|                              | Other local services                          | 1,5%                                      |                 |
|                              | Distance to social infrastructure             |                                           |                 |
|                              | Kinder garden and Child care facilities       | 8,5%                                      | 50,0%           |
|                              | Elementary, primary and secondary school      | 8,5%                                      |                 |
|                              | Social facilities                             | 2,5%                                      |                 |
|                              | Healthcare                                    | 5,5%                                      |                 |
|                              | Pharmacy                                      | 2,5%                                      |                 |
|                              | Distance to leisure facilities                |                                           |                 |
|                              | Sport facilities                              | 1,0%                                      |                 |
|                              | Cultural facilities                           | 1,0%                                      |                 |
|                              | Force Majeure                                 |                                           |                 |
|                              | Natural Hazards (floods, avalanches)          | 10,0%                                     |                 |
|                              | Free of disturbing sources of emissions       | 5,5%                                      |                 |
|                              | Ambient noise during the day                  | 3,5%                                      |                 |
|                              | Ambient noise during the night                | 3,5%                                      |                 |
|                              | Contamination                                 | 10,0%                                     |                 |
|                              | Location                                      | 5,5%                                      |                 |

**Figure 1.** Criteria catalogue, thematic aspect 1 Location and Mobility, with associated weighting of criteria and sub-criteria, translated from [7].

| GROUP                        | CRITERIA                                      | SUB-CRITERIA                              | WEIGHTING FACTOR |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|------------------|
| TYPE                         | Direct sunshine on the property               | 16,5%                                     |                 |
|                              | Orientation                                  | 16,5%                                     |                 |
|                              | Location                                     | 16,5%                                     |                 |
|                              | Designated land use                           | 20,5%                                     | 50,0%           |
|                              | Technical infrastructure                      | 20,5%                                     |                 |
|                              | Ease of access                               |                                           | 20,0%           |
|                              | Public accessibility                          | 45,0%                                     |                 |
|                              | Parking availability                          | 35,0%                                     |                 |
|                              | Parking availability                          | 20,0%                                     |                 |

**Figure 2.** Criteria catalogue, thematic aspect 2 Plot of Land, with associated weighting of criteria and sub-criteria, translated from [7].

Criteria catalogues or indicators are a common tool in assessing the quality of buildings or properties [8]. In relation to property management the ESI® (Economic Sustainability Indicator) [9] provides a methodology for assessing the external framework conditions of properties by defining weighted indicators from the perspective of the investment. Other indicator sets, which are more
related to the ecological sustainability related to construction in the German and Austrian market can be found in the building certification schemes, such as the German Sustainable Building Council (DGNB)[10], or the two Austrian Sustainable Building Councils (ÖGNI, ÖGNB)[11][12].

Figure 3. Criteria catalogue, thematic aspect 3 Building, with associated weighting of criteria and sub-criteria, translated from [7].

In order to arrive at a suitable set of criteria for the specific targeted group of persons entitled to asylum, an in-depth literature review of regulations, associated guidelines and papers has been undertaken. Based on this assessment a criteria catalogue has been developed within a completed Master thesis for the project [7]. The criteria are summarized in three main thematic aspects based on (1) Location and Mobility, (2) Plot of Land and (3) Building. Each group is further sub-divided into main Criteria and Sub-Criteria. Figures 1 to 3 illustrate the developed criteria catalogue: Figure 1
shows the criteria catalogue for the first thematic aspect “Location and Mobility”, Figure 2 shows the second thematic aspect “Plot of Land” and Figure 3 displays the third thematic aspect, “Building”. As criteria and sub-criteria vary in importance related to the target group and research question, each criterion has been weighed in order to allow for an adequate assessment across a diverse range of aspects. The weighting is based on the importance of each thematic aspect and subsequently the detailed criteria and sub-criteria. The criteria as well as the selected weighting factors are in detail described in [7].

3. Results and discussions
The building case studies were supposed to be selected within three to five rural municipalities, which had been defined in the first step of the approach. However, since only one rural municipality has finally committed to act as a case study, the choice of suitable buildings has also been limited to this municipality. Furthermore, no suitable vacant buildings could be identified. The asylum seekers and those entitled to asylum living in this case-study municipality currently live in a privately rented house and in another already refurbished building. A third building is currently at a planning stage for the same use. For the purpose of the study the building at planning stage has been used to apply and validate the above described criteria catalogue and to assess the economic potential. Since the criteria catalog is based on a variety of preliminary uses, it should be taken into account that objects that are already used as single-family homes are more likely to achieve a favourable rating than objects that were not previously used as single- or multi-family homes. The detailed assessment of the building provided a grade of 1.53 for all criteria (graded from 1 “best case” to 3 “worst case”), thus the analyzed property has been proven to be suitable for this purpose.

It should however be noted that the result describes the suitability and thus the potential for sustainable refurbishment. In order to refurbish the object according to the state of the art of refurbishment standards, numerous measures and investments would be necessary. A major item of sustainable refurbishment and an important step towards reducing energy consumption is the construction of a high quality thermal building envelope. Another major item is the renewal of the building services, especially in order to meet the needs of space heating and hot water supply from preferably renewable sources.

4. Conclusions
The purpose of this paper is to present the necessity to deal with this complex topic in an interdisciplinary way. This subsequently leads to a common methodological approximation towards the joint topics of rural exodus, conservation of building stock and living space for persons entitled to asylum. Due to the sensitivity of the overall topic of forced migration, the lack of a sound database on municipality-related shares of persons entitled to asylum, on vacant buildings as well as on established business models related to the cooperation of local small-scale enterprises and building companies on the one hand and persons entitled to asylum on the other hand, and due to the complexity of the associated framework conditions, the assessment has been limited to an exemplary case study of a single rural municipality in Austria. The application of the developed criteria catalogue for this case study shows, that the criteria suitably cover the main aspects related to the refurbishment of existing buildings for person entitled to asylum. However, due to the limited choice of application within this research project, the criteria catalogue cannot be considered “validated” for a broader use, as this would necessitate a higher number of case studies and subsequent applications of the developed criteria catalogue.

The conclusions, which can be derived from the analysed case study summarise the main criteria, which are prerequisite conditions for a successful implementation of this potential concept. Overall, the empirical results support the following findings: (1) Persons entitled to asylum are not perceived as a potential target group by the real estate market. (2) The requirements of local companies involved in building refurbishment actions do not match the potential of persons entitled to asylum, both from a quantitative (potential of employees) as well as qualitative (skills) point of view. (3) The concept of
matching rural vacancy and subsequent upgrading as well as refurbishment of buildings and the renewal of village centres in cooperation with persons entitled to asylum is currently not supported by the present legal framework conditions. The development of effective strategies considering the potential of persons entitled to asylum in order to create their own living spaces and to reduce the number of vacant buildings particularly in rural areas struggling with population decline necessitates a viable legal, infrastructure related and market driven framework.

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