

## ***AN ARCHITECTURE FOR THE PEOPLE?***

*By*

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### **#1 A new agenda**

At the opening of the Oslo Opera House in 2008, drawn by the renowned architectural firm Snøhetta, the Norwegian king Harald V defined the marble clad building at the Oslo harbor front as a «monumental landmark» for the city (Image: Oslo Opera). However, it was not the formal qualities of the building's angled white planes that would grant the building fame in the years to come, neither the experiences its opera-function offered, were we could "...experience ourselves and the world in which we dwell...", according to the Norwegian King. What instead resonated among both architects and laymen, was its public accessible roof. While this urban space in many ways was in line with Snøhetta's legacy as an inherently landscape-oriented architectural practice, it also concurred with an emerging emphasis on social concerns within architecture culture, that would grow in strength in the years to come. This newfound accentuation of social sustainability within the discipline illustrated by the Oslo Opera was most recently exemplified in the 2016 Venice Biennale "Reporting from the Front," envisaging a agenda for architectural production accentuating the social capacities of the discipline more than the formal qualities of its buildings.

The opera opening can thus be seen to symbolically mark a shift in architectural discourse, that for the previous decades had been predominantly preoccupied with architectural *objects*: In Norway, like most of Europe, architectural discourse had from the mid 1980s focused on formal post-modernism, or approaches to architecture and urban form inherited from structuralism. But more importantly, in the Norwegian context, was the perception of architecture as an autonomous practice, maintaining as well as re-interpreting the legacy of Norwegian architects Sverre Fehn, Knut Knutsen or Wenche Selmer, further bolstered by architect and historian Christian Norberg-Schulz's theorization on architectural phenomenology. Emerging out of the Oslo School of Architecture and Design during the post-war era, and rooted in several generations of architectural practice, this tradition nurtured an inherently humanist approach to architectural conduct as discussed by Ellefsen/Mujezinovic in "Cutom Made: Takes on Contemporary Norwegian Architecture" (World Architecture 05/2014). While social concerns framed these practices, the architectural object was ultimately interpreted through its formal faculties as *work*; an autonomous object conceived by an independent actor through his or her artistic practice and craftsmanship.

### **#2 Neoliberalism and architectural practice**

The 1980s brought forth a novel economic reality for architectural production: Where the critique of modernism's deterministic universalism in the late 1960s and 1970s had resulted in new architectural models, neoliberal concepts of new-governance and incremental planning models now replaced the synoptic planning and growth-regimes of the post-war decades. As a result, the building industry, which through the 1950s and 60 had been instrumental to the comprehensive planning models of the era, was prone to a new economic reality redefining the relationship between client and architect. New real estate development models increased demands of architectural performance, as the architectural project *itself* became a primary urban development tool. Consequently, architectural representations and architectural visualization techniques embedded architecture deeply in the economics of *real estate*. The narratives of neoliberalist urban development revolved around consumerism and

globalization, where combining recreation, entertainment and work was integral to the new post-Fordist logics of production. The post-Fordist economy replaced the Keynesian-Fordist paradigm, defined by the close bonds between government, industry and labor unions, and the separation of domesticity and leisure, (consumption), from the realm of work (production).

The spatial results of post-Fordism are well known from harbor front redevelopments world over. Such project-based urban developments, consisting of large scale architectural interventions and urban designs, were articulated as pedestrianized enclaves centered around shopping and experience, and spearheaded by iconic landmark buildings by architects whose fame grew proportionally to media's production of images. Increasing property prices in down-towns merged with consumer demands for "urban" lifestyles, leading to accelerated gentrification, bolstered by municipal revitalization- and investment strategies to boost competitiveness and attract investment. Such new entertainment areas utilized the potential market value of social congregation in urban space, and became criticized for their commodification of the social sphere of cities. Still, harbor front redevelopments and the gentrification of the urban core throughout the 1990s and 2000s displayed the social potential inherent in the previously neglected downtowns of the world's cities.

### **#3 The architectural object and government**

Confronted with increased demands for building economy and efficiency within neoliberal forms of production, one can argue that leading architects in Norway resorted into nurturing cultural icons, lavish villas or other objects of redundancy that allowed for a more elaborate architecture than what speculative housing and office schemes allowed for. But while Norway also produced its share of architectural excess for private clients, it was its governmental "National Tourist Routes" project, consisting of small but uncompromising architectural installations along Norway's scenic infrastructure, that became Norway's most important architectural institution throughout the 1990s, ultimately contributing to a «re-launch» of Norwegian architecture on the world stage. While the tourist route project framed Norwegian architecture as sometimes frugal and ascetic, other times playful and whimsical, the architectural cementation of a Norwegian architectural identity-brand was built on the legacy of the building as *work* and architect as *auteur*, in control of all aspects of building design and execution. Much in accordance with the "Fehn tradition", such projects conveyed a unit between artist intention and landscape constraints.

The tourist route project was both the result *of*, and an agent *for*, new bonds between the architectural profession and the culture sector in Norway. And throughout the 1990's, core actors within the architectural community not only reframed architecture within the cultural sector, but also contributed to an increased awareness towards the architectural field in other sectors of the Norwegian society and governmental administration. While this repositioning concurred with the age of cultural urbanism and architectural icons, it more importantly corresponded with an era of unsurpassed economic growth in Norway, that also led to large scale governmental spending in social, technical and cultural infrastructure. Concurrently, architectural quality ceased to be perceived as a symbol of excess, but increasingly also became recognized as a societal value and potential political tool. It is in this context that the current accentuation of social sustainability and resilience in Norwegian architecture best might be addressed.

### **#4 The re-politicization of architecture and "architecturalization" of politics**

The Oslo Opera, a building conceived at the peak of architectural icons as well as economic optimism at the turn of the millennium, opened amid an economic crisis, flanked by a surging critique towards neoliberalist urban development models, especially within academia. The shift towards political

reengagement in architecture can be seen in context of this crisis, and the social movements it triggered (I.e. the Occupy Wall-Street movement), as suggested by Alejandro Xaera-Polo in his essay *Well into the 21. Century - The architecture of post-capitalism* (El Corquis, no. 187, 2016). Offices like Norwegian Tyn Tegnestue, exemplify such an architectural activism, nurturing the vernacular in search for low budget commissions with social impacts. But while the re-politicization of architecture might have provided the profession with novel agendas for architectural practice also in the Norwegian context, the impact of such reassessments is of minor significance, and there have been few examples of social oriented architecture emerging out of societal or professional necessity. Although marginalization of certain social groups also takes place in the Norwegian context, genuine societal crisis with profound effects on architectural production have most evidently been displayed in southern parts of Europe: In Spain, for example, the lack of an economic base for practice coincided with an acute and graspable social crisis architects could challenge through non-profit spatial or programmatic interventions.

Thus, social resilience in the Norwegian context can maybe most fruitfully be addressed in the perspective of government programs, and the role architecture plays in terms of providing public-sector services: The perpetual reinvention and refinement of governance processes also affect its architectural residues, reflecting the social dimension of political reform. This is perhaps most visible in welfare projects, such as schools for lower education, where the public client aspires to absorb discussions on contemporary pedagogical models (independent learning, dynamic relationship between pupils and teachers, social engagement among students, etc.) and aims to transform such ideas into physical form. This illustrative in the new high school in Oslo, “Kuben” (The Hive) designed by Uno Architects. Spatial fluidity, including the mixture of open and closed spaces, embraces both the social dimension of school life and its potentials for learning, as well as being highly efficient in terms of its overarching organizational scheme. Similar frameworks may be seen also in other type of public welfare projects, such as university building or even prisons, where the accentuation of rehabilitation also manifests in architectural and spatial layout. This is especially evident in Halden prison, characterized in a New York Times article as a space of “radical humanness.” (Jessica Benko, NYT, March 26, 2015). Such spatial manifestations of political goals, whether regarding creating new learning-environments for students, or new rehabilitation-locations for convicts, are enabled by nurturing an elastic relationship between governmental practices and different user-groups, or population segments. This bridging is facilitated through a feedback loop where the architectural profession participates on both sides of the fence; both being representatives for public building management agencies, as well as being commissioned designers.

## **#5 Architecture as added value**

Critics of public new-governance strategies in Norway have often noted on how landmark buildings and culture-institutions funded by governments were vehicles to increase property value, attract foreign investment and accelerate urban development processes. However, the recent decade has also displayed how the municipalities of smaller urban communities have invested in high quality culture buildings with a high social utilization value. Despite re-occurring critiques of municipal spending of tax-money on what is regarded as superfluous culture-centers (concert halls, literature centers and obscure museums for Norwegian rock-music), it also envisages, after decades of commercialization and professionalization of architectural practice, how elaborate and advanced architecture increasingly exceeds its role as symbol of excess, towards becoming a tool for societal development. More surprisingly, this has also spilled over onto the private sector, where investors increasingly become aware of the potential economic incentives of the social sphere of cities, beyond the blunt

entertainment and shopping-products of the 1980s and 90s. This is effectively visible in the newly opened culture-office house *Sentralen*, designed by Kima Architects and Atelier Oslo, where the historic bank building is turned into a delicate mixture of the new and the existing, being a follow-up of Jensen & Skodvin's Doga culture center building from 2004. Such projects are subtler than the previous neo-liberal manifestations of the 1980s and 1990s which embraced the social and cultural through the consumerist economy. Conversely, these projects are poised to offer spatial infrastructure for production in the city itself – production of culture. On an anecdotal level, it is a rather interesting experience to visit Sentralen's coffee shop, gathering a notable amount of culture-industry types preparing their funding-applications towards different public institutions to finance their miscellaneous artistic projects.

## **#6 Architecture as societal tool**

While the political re-engagement within parts of the architectural community is genuine, saturating the practices of a growing amount of architectural offices world over, one cannot but observe the extent to which social agendas becomes intrinsic to economic surplus. Thus, rather than introducing the age of post-capitalism, the new social agenda of architecture instead seem to envisage the contours of post-liberalist capitalism, where the political re-engagement of architectural practices swiftly becomes operationalized within the current day economic logics of development: In short, social implications replaces «entertainment» as legitimation strategy and branding device, as an embedded part of project aesthetics. However, the accentuation of the social sphere of cities and the social value of architecture emerging in the mid 2000s cannot be reduced to the social equivalent of “green washing,” or similar commercial strategies to profit on social sustainability. Neither can it solely be seen a device for providing the profession with a new rhetoric to project meaning upon a profession in need for direction. In the Norwegian context, the renewed focus on the social sphere can rather be seen to help reframed social resilience in architecture as a value-factor for governmental conduct: Whether being educational facilities, infrastructural installations or cultural institutions, architectural performance is in a governance perspective increasingly measured through notions of social sustainability. This leads us to primarily understand and accentuate social resilience in Norwegian architecture through the structural framework of governmental administration, and the porosity of such public bodies that enable architectural innovation and notions of architectural quality to affect and define governmental policy, as illustrated by the project presented above, and within this issue of World Architecture.

## **#7 Democratic spaces?**

In 2016, the Fritt Ord Foundation, a private non-profit foundation for free speech aiming towards promoting and protecting freedom of expression in Norway, invested in the architectural office Snøhetta, becoming the only external owner with a share of 20 percent. While primarily being a financial investment, Fritt Ord saw Snøhetta as a practice drawing what they defined as “free and open democratic spaces.” Referring to the architectural firm's portfolio of cultural buildings, the foundation saw kinship between Snøhetta and Fritt Ord's fundamental values. This investment not only pointed to how certain architectural practices have become attractive in a market perspective, but also the increased focus on architecture's role to secure and nurture social resilience. The agency of architecture as social sustainable, thus, is to a less extent present in the ideological platforms of social activist. We accentuate this perspective to convey how the state of architecture not only can be measured by the motivation and agendas of its protagonists, as often addressed at architectural exhibitions. The discipline's capacity to act is rather tied to its political frameworks, and how the

profession maintains its relevance through creating attractive environments that answer to societal needs. A precondition in this regard, is the flexibility and adaptability of public bodies to obtain and operationalize architectural innovations in governmental conduct: Ultimately, it is not whether architectural offices frame themselves as socially practices, but the impact of architecture as discipline manages to have within the governmental frameworks that facilitate the technical, social and cultural facilities of society.