

SOARING HIGH

Oslo's rampant rise

Oslo, what are you doing? While some new, well-designed buildings have been and are being constructed, it would be a crying shame if the current tendency to overbuild were to get so far out of hand that Oslo's cultural character is lost. At this stage, the balance is tilting toward this likelihood. The barcode buildings, which look more like a row of crooked bottom teeth than a collection of interesting edifices, block the fjord and eat up the urban space – and that's only one aspect. However, a number of enlightened minds is actively spreading awareness and aiming to steer things in a better direction.

TEXT Juriaan Benschop



City of Dislocation exhibition in the Oslo Pilot Project Room, 2015

Oslo is building. Exiting the railway station, one is immediately confronted with a large construction site, where the new library is about to materialise. Just behind this, already completed, is the National Opera House, confidently emerging from the waterfront. From its rooftop is a view over the new Fjord City, to the so-called barcode buildings that form Oslo's skyline. A cluster of cultural edifices is soon to be concentrated here, among them the new Munch museum. And in another part of the centre, behind the famous Nobel Academy, the new National Museum will house several museums under one canopy, among them the National Gallery and the Museum of Contemporary Art.

Meanwhile, the museums still exist in their old locations. In visiting them, one starts to wonder what will happen with these impressive historic structures. There are no clear plans. For this reason, two foresighted people decided to hold up a magnifying glass to the changes happening in the city: Oslo Pilot, a two-year investigative project curated by Per Gunnar Eeg-Tverbakk and Eva González-Sancho, has teamed up with a group of architects to create a series of events and exhibitions, one of which is City of Dislocation. Visiting the opening, different versions of the story can be heard. In short, due to its avid exploration of oil wells, Norway has become wealthy, and everybody profits from that. The availability of money has given rise to ambitious urban plans. But the development, in terms of cultural debate and views on the city's progress, has not been equally speedy. It has since become clear that some neighbourhoods

are going to lose characterful public buildings, including the social traffic they attract, and a sense of unease can be felt, even though this is usually expressed in a moderate, let's call it a Norwegian way. Oslo Pilot poses questions. "It seems like everybody has bought into the [Richard] Florida-inspired belief that a concentration of important cultural arenas in one particular area will benefit the entire city. Now, however, in light of a receding Norwegian economy and various critical attacks on Florida's theories, one might surely ask what this Fjord City consolidation has actually achieved on behalf of Oslo as a whole", the project members proffer.

Snøhetta is the architecture office that built the National Opera House. Project director Simon Ewings explains that their vision was for a building that was the opposite of elitist, and this seems to have worked out, as crowds of people use the rooftop as a public square. "We didn't want any commercial activity on the roof. It's just an open space that can be interpreted freely. Like a hilltop." Asked about what he thinks of the development of Fjord City as it takes shape, he responds: "There are plenty of exciting developments happening, but we feel it's important that attention is paid to making good public spaces. For example, in the original plan, the barcode buildings were supposed to be very thin, with big spaces in-between them so that they wouldn't create a wall between the city and the fjord. But commercial pressure has led to increased density and they have become broad structures with only narrow spaces between them." In Snøhetta's view, space should be dealt with in a demo-

cratic and balanced way. The opera building was conceived to be as flat and horizontal as possible, using the maximum surface area available. "We believe that public buildings should have a large footprint so that people can use them, while private buildings should have a small footprint and leave room for open public space."

Another architectural player is Space Group, which won the competition to build Oslo's new central railway station. Gary Bates, one of its founders, worked for Rem Koolhaas for many years before settling in Oslo. He is critical about the developments on Oslo's waterfront. Contrary to the situation in the USA, where he comes from, there is hardly any discourse or cultural critique in Norway. Even though he doesn't know the aim of Fjord City, he sees an enormous potential in unlocking this formerly industrial frontage, making it available for use by the general public. Yet that has still not happened; at present the district is mainly populated by financial workers. And, as Bates notes, "To consolidate in one location at the expense



Barcode Project, part of the Fjord City redevelopment, seen from Sørenga, 2012
Photo © Helge Høifødt

of other parts of the city is the cultural equivalent of America's shopping malls." In his mind, architecture is not just about visual representation. "You need to have a strategic approach, and that's what is missing here. You need to have the right friction between function and scale." For Bates, it is clear that Fjord City is purely an economically driven initiative. This doesn't mean he thinks that all institutions should re-



Munchmuseet, Oslo, 1963
Einar Myklebust and Gunnar Fougner, architects
Photo: Knudsens fotoatelier
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House of Commons in front of the Stortinget (Parliament of Norway), Oslo, 2015
by Marianne Heske
Photos: Niklas Lello

main in their current buildings; for instance, it's understandable that the library would look for a new home, as its function has changed so much over the years – it's not only about books anymore. "What I find particularly problematic in the consolidation of cultural programmes is the lack of vision regarding the 'remains'. I would argue that the city has all the necessary 'pieces', and so with some creative curation, old functions could find new opportunities while new ones could invade and occupy non-purpose-built, existing edifices. The pop-up city."

Artist Marianne Heske is also sceptical about the development in Bjørvika. She refers to some odd circumstances. "Basically, they are building mansions on a frozen lake", she says. "You could deduct it from the name of the city, the 'Os' is the outlet of the river Akerseleva. We must not block the beautiful Oslofjord from the city by building an architectonic, fancy fence." She emphasises that the National Opera House has been sinking by centimetres since it was finished in 2008, as it is built on clay. "And they used Italian marble without realising that it's a material affected by humidity and thereby loses its colour – it has to be cleaned every few years. Why not use Norwegian

stone? There is plenty of it." Heske's work involves the close observation of nature, the mountains, and rural ways of living. Her House of Commons piece was a case in point, an art project initiated by Oslo Pilot. She moved an ordinary, traditional old wooden house from Østfold County to the centre of Oslo, where it stayed for a couple of months in the square next to the National Parliament and the Grand Hotel. Around 150-thousand people came to see it, she tells us when we visit the site together. "People have a relationship with these kinds of vernacular houses. It also reminds us of Norway's poor past. It's only a recent phenomenon that the country has become rich, so people have started to build villas instead of living in modest houses like this", she informs. Heske's work reactivates a historic awareness that in the rush of spending oil-money, much seems to have been lost.

Oslo Pilot started as a research group with the purpose of developing plans for a Norwegian art biennale. But the curators have chosen to first organise a discussion about the city, rather than blindly adopt the biennale format. In this respect, one can see Norwegian social democracy flowering, as the government is financing a think-tank and allowing it full freedom in choosing what topics to discuss. Will the Biennale eventually take place? "It's unclear if the format of a big biennial art show is appropriate, but we are certainly moving towards a periodic art event. In a way, we have already begun", Eeg-Tverbakk says, in reference to some of the art projects that are part of Oslo Pilot's programme. Considering the huge turnout at its City of Dislocation event and the attention to Heske's project, it is hopeful that artists and architects will indeed come up with ideas for the historic museum buildings that become vacant after the museums move to their new location. Only then will Oslo's past have a future. •

oslopilot.no
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