

Kjetil Ansgar Jakobsen

NORWEGIAN AUTUMN

Kjetil Ansgar Jakobsen is a Norwegian historian and writer, and specialist in recent French, German and Norwegian culture and history of ideas. In this essay he situates Erling Viksjø's buildings in the Government Quarter in a Norwegian architectural history characterized by conflict.

Equality is not a uniquely Norwegian or Scandinavian characteristic. Historically, the differences in income and wealth have been as great in Norway as in other European countries; this is true whether you look at the Viking era or the nineteenth century. Scandinavian equality emerged from the struggles of the labour movement around the middle of the 20th century. In the 1920s, less than a century ago, British newspapers warned their readers against what they called the 'Norwegian condition', that is social paralysis resulting from bitter class struggle and endless strikes and lockouts. But then Norwegian society changed. Incomes policies came into place wherein wage rises and labour conflicts are regulated through negotiations at a national level involving the organizations representing labour, capital and Governmental expertise. This uniquely Scandinavian system of governance has led to small differences in income, consistently low levels of unemployment and high rises in productivity.

A generous welfare state was built, with free education, health services and universal benefits. The housing market was regulated, and 'Husbanken' (The Norwegian State Housing Bank) enabled most Norwegians to buy their own homes. The Golden Age was the Gerhardsen epoch after World War II. Capable social governance and a strong collective project defied society's 'law of gravity' and created an unusually egalitarian society. But as early as the 1980s, inequalities began to increase again. Equality is not a law of nature in the Nordic countries.

Hammersborg in Oslo is where you best sense the way in which modern Norway was forged amidst the struggle of conflicting interests. Take a seat on the stairs in front of the Deichman building and let your gaze wander! You are sitting surrounded by Trinity Church from 1858, the Deichman Central Library (opened in 1933) and the 'Y-block' from 1969. The aesthetic contrasts are stark. All three buildings were built as proud expressions of the State and the democracy of their time. Nevertheless they dislike, indeed even hate, one another.

In the nineteenth century, Hammersborg, the small hill above Oslo, was given the nickname 'the Norwegian Acropolis'. The so called Public Servant state (*embetsmannstaten*) of that era built a hospital there and located three churches on the hill: the Trinity Church, Saint Olav's Cathedral and the Johannes Church. The style and materials of the churches marked firm affiliations with a Lutheran culture with its centre in northern Germany. The churches – including the Roman Catholic Saint Olav's – are in red brick, like those in Lübeck, Hamburg and Danzig. The style is Romantic-historical, influence by Gothic. The Public Servant state was governed by a self-assured educational elite with cultural and often also personal links to Denmark and Germany. All the churches were designed by German-born architects: Alexis de Chateauneuf, Wilhelm von Hanno and Heinrich Schirmer.

After 1884, a new political system was adopted with parliamentary rule and political parties. The 'Venstre' ('left') movement that dominated the state from 1884 was a national-liberal movement with brave ambitions for public education. The state apparatus grew, and important buildings were added to the area by the hill in the middle of the capital. The Supreme Court was finished in 1903, designed by the Norwegian Hans Jacob Sparre. Three years later came the present-day Ministry of Finance, designed by Henrik Bull in the Art Nouveau style. According to the plan, the building, which was given a distinctly national look, was only to be the first wing in a large, H-shaped government building at Hammersborg. In 1921 the construction of the Deichman Central Library began as a temple of knowledge on the Norwegian Acropolis. None of these projects were completed. In the case of the Deichman building, a long row of columns that ends in nothing recalls a construction process that was discontinued in 1933, when the budget had been spent and Neoclassicism had long gone out of fashion. The national-liberal bourgeois regime functioned badly in Norway. Historians have viewed this in the light of the fact that the commerce-based bourgeoisie lacked the capacity for national leadership. The Norwegian business community was dominated by the shipping industry, and some of the leading political figures in these years were shipping magnates. This was true of the three prime ministers Christian Michelsen and J.L. Mowinckel from Bergen, and Gunnar Knudsen from Porsgrunn. But the shipowners were weakly rooted both nationally and in the capital.

Following Jens Arup Seip's famous lecture *From The Public Servant State to the One-party State*, the history of Norwegian democracy is customarily divided into three 'regimes': the Public Servant state from 1814 until 1884; the bourgeois multi-party or Liberal state from 1884 until 1935 and the Social Democratic order or Labour Party state from 1935 or 1945.¹ I use the word 'regime' here, as do biologists, to indicate a relatively stable dynamic system. The Labour Party assumed power in two stages, in 1935 with Nygaardsvold and following the Liberation in 1945 with Gerhardsen. The 'Eagle among political parties' retained power for a generation. With 'Høyblokka' or H-block (the Highrise Cabinet Building) and the Y-block, an overall plan for the Government Quarter was conceived in accordance with the architect Erling Viksjø's drawings. Here, as in other areas, the Social Democrat order demonstrated vigour and the ability to govern.

¹ Following 1814 independence, much of the personnel of the multinational kingdom of Denmark stayed in place, constituting a social elite among the "natives" of Norway. The term *embetsmann* in 19th century Norway denoted an exclusive group of higher civil servants, university professors and judges. These top level public servants enjoyed legal privileges ensuring their autonomy from politics (they were tenured for life and could not be dismissed), and for decades they dominated both parliamentary debates, the cabinet and social life, due to the prestige of university education. It may be instructive to understand the concept of the "*embetsmannstat*" in light of Max Weber's and later Fritz Ringer's analyses of related social strata in 19th and 20th century German society as "mandarins".

The will to conserve has been weak at Hammersborg, something which is perhaps related to the fact that this is the locus of power in Norway. As Aristotle pointed out in antiquity, statecraft is a matter of *kairos* – that is, of observing the times and finding the right moment to act. Each regime has wished to mark the hill above the capital with its vision and its view of what constitutes the good state and the good life. Some of the mandarin Public Servant state's finest buildings were demolished to make room for twentieth-century buildings. The Johannes Church disappeared in 1924; the 'Empire (Regency) style District', designed by Christian Grosch early in the 1800s, was torn down to make room for the H- and the Y-blocks. The Trinity Church, which is one of Norway's most monumental, was allowed to stand. But the Deichman building steals space from the church and pushes it out onto a crossroads while at the same time the refined green surfaces of the Neoclassical library make the pious red brick of the church seem shoddy. The Y-block takes up all the space over which the Deichman was meant to hover, and with its modernist forms creates a stark but interesting contrast to the two older buildings. No, Norwegian nation building is not all harmony.,

The Trinity Church and the Deichman are important Oslo buildings. But they are not significant buildings in the international context. There are neo-Gothic churches and Neoclassical libraries in most major cities. Viksjø's Government Quarter, on the other hand, is unique. Only Oslo has this architecture with this type of decoration.

It is now the autumn of Social Democracy. The Government Quarter was built to give material form to the most important collective project in Norwegian history. Soon it is to be demolished and replaced by a new government complex that will have even larger dimensions and transform the physiognomy of Oslo even more radically than Viksjø's complex did. According to plan, the demolition of the solid Y-block, which survived the 22nd July attack almost unscathed, is to start in October 2019. The H-block is said to have been saved, after intense mobilization of resistance. But this is a mirage. As a landmark and symbolic building it will vanish, surrounded as it will be by massive office buildings of the same height as the H-block. So that it will not disappear entirely, additional stories are to be added to the building that once towered over Oslo. It is not the first time that Viksjø's masterpiece has been maltreated. The first storey of the H-block was walled in so that the building no longer hovered in the air. In 1990 two floors were added. This meant the disappearance of the organically sculptured top storey with the famous elevator house and cabinet hall. The much-maligned box shape was something the government building only took on as a result of successive rebuildings. The restoration after the terror attack might have provided an opportunity to restore the building to its original beauty and originality. Instead it was once again transformed in a way which deprived it of character, reducing the monument to a plain high-rise.

The two wounded giants still stand on Norway's Acropolis. They are ghost buildings within which forgotten stories and dreams meander. If we are to learn from them, we must open them up by asking questions. The buildings were functional, but they were also representative, created in response to an apparently insoluble paradox: how does one create an enduring monument to an antimemorial culture? Never was the rhetoric of power so timid as in the Gerhardsen era. This was the generation that built a new society, rebuilding the country after the war. 'Objectivity' and 'precision' were the watchwords in a textbook for the *philosophicum* university entrance exam by the philosopher Arne Næss, which appeared in 1947 and which for thirty years marked the gateway to Norwegian universities. Viksjø and Gerhardsen disliked monumental architecture as fostered in the totalitarian states of the time

by Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin. At the same time both architect and contractor wished to mark a distance from the US-style 'corporate aesthetic', as represented by Mies van der Rohe's office-block architecture. Viksjø met these challenges by using sober, clean lines, low-key, integrated decoration and a unique choice of materials. State power was not clad in marble or glass and steel, but in sandblasted 'natural concrete', a brand new building material that Viksjø and the engineer Sverre Jystad had developed and patented. River gravel from the Hønefoss region was mixed into the cement. The artistic decoration was sandblasted into the concrete, thus achieving a distinctive tactility. The art is not on the surface, it resides in the body of the building and invites you to touch it. In order to realize this entirely untried type of decoration, Viksjø engaged the artists Carl Nesjar, Inger Sitter, Odd Tandberg, Tore Haaland, Kai Fjell, Hannah Ryggen and Pablo Picasso. Without remuneration of any kind, the world-famous Picasso continued his collaboration with Nesjar and Viksjø until the Y-block was finished in 1969, and radically influenced the Government Quarter with his art. The veteran avant-gardist and socialist must have been deeply fascinated by this vision of art in an indissoluble unity with working life and architecture. The construction process began in 1956. Labourers and artists worked side by side, floor by floor. Despite, or because of, the fact that the budget was modest and the state thrifty, in 1958 the Norwegian Government could already move in. Everything was thoroughly thought out. Government and state administration did not simply move into a new building. The whole interior was specially designed in the modern style: office chairs, chairs for meetings, writing desks, meeting tables, door handles, lamps and light fittings.

The post-war era was a heyday for Norwegian and Scandinavian design, and the radical nature of the aesthetic revolution at Hammersborg enchanted its contemporaries. Such an organic unity of art, design and architecture had not been seen in the Western World for centuries. Architectural critics invoked parallels with the Gothic cathedrals and the temples of antiquity.²

The artists were fully aware that it was official buildings they were decorating. The motifs are abstract or universally human, the design style buoyant, light and subtle. Picasso set the tone. Even Hannah Ryggen's tapestries are more dreaming and utopian than polemical. The building is the message.

Viksjø's *Gesamtkunstwerk* is about democracy rooted in hard work and popular involvement, the national in interaction with the international, and about technically sophisticated governance. The H- and Y-blocks do not pay homage to utopia and hardly even to progress; they are rather a homage to the tools of progress – that is, to intelligent and rational governance. The H-block's screen-like facade is a compliment to the working methods of bureaucracy, to graph paper and filing cabinets. In 1969, the H-block found its match in the Y-block, this too built in natural concrete and decorated by Nesjar and Picasso. The H-block's firm rectangle resonates with the low-rise office building's extended and elegant curves, forming an indissoluble unity.

² Christian Norberg-Schulz, quoted in Hugo Lauritz Jenssen's excellent construction history of the H-block (Oslo, Press forlag 2014, p. 102).

Katja Høst's postcards with motifs from the Government Quarter comment on the ahistoricism of Norwegian cultural administration as manifested in the treatment of Viksjø's Government Quarter. They point to a lack of historical awareness in policies that have allowed the demolition of this major monument to Norwegian modernity, ironically fulfilling the terrorist's intention. How can one permit the demolition of a unique cultural monument that exemplifies the scope of modern Norway's history and experience so thoroughly? Other countries celebrate their cultural heritage with postcards and postage stamps. Norway tears down its monumental buildings. Høst has eschewed the usual approaches to architectural photography intended to aestheticize. Here we see no wide-angle shots, blue skies or bright colours. She takes us close to the gravel of the natural concrete and displays its tactility. The low-key, documentary style of the photographs is in keeping with the aesthetic that is documented. The same goes for the filing-cabinet-like presentation in postcard racks.

In their shy monumentality, the H-and Y-blocks recall a state that had a soul. The long rows of identical offices express both equality and individuality. In Gerhardsen's Government Quarter each bureaucrat and politician had an office and its size was fixed almost independently of rank. Some lines in Norwegian history and culture, which are much older than Social Democracy, culminated here: Lutheran modesty, a sense of duty and trust in the state as a problem-solver. When you sit on the stairs, you can imagine that behind each window a bureaucrat is working quietly away. During the lunch break, silence is broken by sandwich paper rustling and low-voiced conversations about speed skating records and long cross country ski hikes, and about weekends in wood cabins, the kind without electricity and running water, as far as possible from the crowds. It will not be like this in the new Government Quarter. Today's bureaucrats have to take their place in open-plan offices with cubicles and the odd meeting room, and they will be organized and motivated in line with organizational doctrines imported from the model nations of the market economy .

Since Friedrich Hegel gave his lectures on aesthetics in Berlin in the 1820s, we have known that art and architecture express the historical life of mankind. They give enduring form and expression to the thinking, sensibility and political projects of the age. In the past year, the Norwegian construction directorate Statsbygg has filled both the mediasphere and the city space in Oslo with models and simulations of its planned new Government Quarter. How does the Solberg state wish to appear? What kind of power is unfolding here? What can we as citizens of the Norwegian state learn about the order of which we are a part from studying these prospects?

Erling Viksjø's Government Quarter is a pure winter landscape. Viksjø built Norwegian mountainsides, buildings made to function, shaped by the climate and realities of the Northay. Katja Høst takes photographs of buildings that are alive but may soon die. She photographs the monument as process, as *durée* or duration in the sense of the philosopher Henri Bergson's. This is architectural photography that highlights the irreversible, transformative force of time.

But with the data manipulations of Statsbygg and the competition winner Urbis, we take a fictional tiger leap out of time into an eternal early summer in which the sun always shines on the Government Quarter, where the lawns are green and the trees are always in bloom. Apart from its unusually dense and massive structure, the project resembles a typical international office complex. Five thousand work stations – corresponding to a whole small Norwegian town – are crammed into a block set in the tight street grid of central Oslo. As at the former airport Fornebu, individual buildings have been given unusual, digitally created forms that suggest a connection with a placeless digital culture of knowledge. Gerhardsen's Government Quarter has a frank, transparent expression. Solberg's Government Quarter, however, adheres to a digital culture that masks functional 'hardware' with human-friendly 'software'. The steely monsters are covered with green turf, and in the photographic simulations the largest office buildings Norway has ever seen are placed in what appears to be an inviting park milieu. But the green patches are to serve as air vents for the thousands of bureaucrats inside and will be muddy and icy for much of the year.

Does the Solberg state have a soul? Is the new Government Quarter anything more than a place where global capitalism can stop over? It is difficult to detect a clear identity in the project. The highrises could house almost anything and be from anywhere. No mark of participation in the nation as a democratic project can be detected. The green roofs fail to give the intended nod back to the turf roofs of National Romanticism – the shift in scale from hay barn to Government Quarter is too absurd. Instead, the project's disturbing dimensions remind us of the source of funding, which is the 'Oil Fund', and that this is Norway – *nouveau-riche* Norway. Membership of the Government Pension Fund (Global) is the new collective project. It is where we belong.



