

Utopia and Conservation

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The terrorist bombing of the government quarter in Oslo on July 22, 2011, did not only cause the tragic death of eight people and severe material damage; it also left the central part of downtown Oslo in a state of uncertainty. The recently agreed-upon plan to list the two central, postwar government buildings designed by architect Erling Viksjø, Høyblokka (1959) and Y-blokka (1970), was unexpectedly brought into question. So was the long-established idea of a dispersed governmental quarter and a medium-scaled, diversified urban landscape. The 2015 call for ideas that resulted in seven proposals for a new consolidated government quarter (for 2025 and 2064 respectively) implied extraordinary density, high security, and the demolition of Y-blokka, premises that would completely redefine the urban landscape of Oslo. When confronted by the proposals of the six preselected international teams, one is struck by

the confidence the teams demonstrate when predicting a fifty-year-long urban development and the desire to project one coherent architectural vision into the future. Considering the complex history of the Hammersborg area, where the government quarter is situated, it is peculiar that none of the teams (or the client) seemed to take into account the many compromises, changes of requirements, and unexpected events that already have taken place and most likely will occur in the future. Yet most striking is the absence of ideas for a reimagined historic city. There seems to be an assumed contradiction between architectural imagination and urban conservation: conservation is considered to deal exclusively with the past, is rarely seen as a creative practice, and is reduced to an aspect of architecture and urban planning. There is an urgent need to trace the history of urban conservation in order to reformulate the discipline of urban planning.

In *The Historic Urban Landscape: Managing Heritage in an Urban Century*, Francesco Bandarin and Ron van Oers make the compelling argument that urban conservation is a modern utopia, on equal terms with the canonical twentieth-century utopias authored by Tony Garnier, Ebenezer Howard, Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, and others. Their claim is that urban conservation is “steeped in legend,” aiming to safeguard the integrity and the authenticity of the historic city, though always remaining “an aspiration that is subject to continuous compromise and adaption.” Bandarin and van Oers argue that “if utopias are thought of as collective representations of communities or societies, idealized conditions expressing shared value systems and common goals, then defining urban conservation as a utopia becomes a positive and constructive approach.”¹ When taking this as a point of departure, what are the implications of naming urban conservation a utopia?

What characterizes a utopia are its radical and projective properties, conceived through the creative act of an author. Conservation is perceived as the opposite: conservative, retrospective, and rarely defined as an act of creativity. The idea of conservation as a utopic practice suggests instead that urban conservation is as much about the future as the past, is as radical as any other utopia, and is undisputedly a creative act.

Utopias have the thrilling effect of electrifying the present, shaking our known world and evoking images of a distant future. The effect is obtained by establishing a discrepancy between *now* and *then*. The larger the discrepancy, the greater the effect, and the more utopian the utopia turns out to be. While the utopias of modernism relied on the shock of demolition and replacement, the utopia of urban conservation relies on recharging the existing: a contamination of familiar objects, buildings, and cities, charging what is familiar with new meaning and projecting them into the future.

An architectural utopia is governed by *practices* conceived according to certain principles, modes of operation, and representational techniques. These practices aim to correspond to the radical nature of the utopia, normally by abandoning the conventions of the realities that the utopia is both opposed to and rooted in. Urban conservation practices operate differently: they aim to infiltrate rather than to abandon, to unravel mysteries rather than to invent new ones, and consequently to create synthesis rather than separation.

So who are the authors of urban conservation utopias, and what are the practices they deploy?

Among the earliest and most prominent examples of urban conservation is the work of the influential Italian architectural historian, restorer, architect, civil engineer, and urban planner Gustavo Giovannoni (1873–1947). He formulated what is considered the first comprehensive concept of urban conservation, parallel to, and possibly an alternative to the known utopias of modernism. According to the French architectural and urban historian Françoise Choay, “[Giovannoni] grants to the ancient urban ensembles both a use value and a museal value by integrating them into a general conception of territorial planning and development.”² He reinforced the historic district as a legitimate entity of cultural heritage, but unlike his forerunners, he took into account the challenges of the industrialized city: accelerating traffic, unsanitary slums, and severe pollution. In contrast to the idea of urban sanitation, as manifested by Baron Haussmann’s transformation of Paris, he proposed a kind of “urban acupuncture,” allowing the systems of modernity to flow through the historic city. He introduced a set of architectural strategies on a small-scale level that

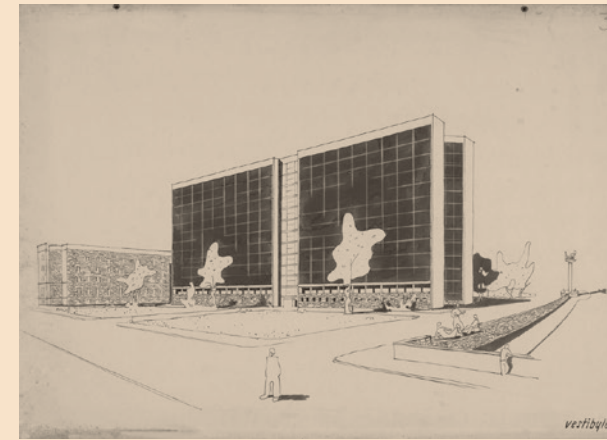


Empirekvartalet
in 1867

enabled a mediation between the historic city and the demands of modern life. According to the architectural historian Lucia Allais, Giovannoni “sought to make monument restoration a true expression of our age, through the application of modern materials. ... Giovannoni saw restoration as a path to an alternate modernity, more modern than modernism itself.”³ Gustavo Giovannoni was instrumental in turning urban conservation into an international movement organized according to universal agreements, charters, and legislation. He was a key player at the 1931 *First International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments*, which resulted in the highly influential *Athens Charter for the Restoration of Historic Monuments*.

Also present at the congress in Athens was the Norwegian delegate Harry Fett (1875–1962), who was the Director General of the Norwegian Directorate of Cultural Heritage from 1913 to 1945 and unquestionably the most influential figure in the formation of a comprehensive Norwegian conservation policy. Fett met Giovannoni in Athens, and he certainly absorbed the ideas that circulated at the Congress. When Fett returned to Norway, he established a conservation policy very much in line with Giovannoni’s ideas, resulting in the protection of significant urban environments like the historic city of Røros, the Kirkeristen in Oslo, and the piers of Bergen. Fett advocated protection of historic environments rather than single buildings and monuments.⁴ He considered historic buildings an integral part of the contemporary city, belonging as much to the present as to the past,⁵ and proposed specific architectural strategies that integrated historical structures with new ones. Harry Fett’s contribution to the intense debate that accompanied the planning process of a new government building in Oslo in the 1940s and ’50s is well known, but the impact his urban conservation ideas had on the result has not been sufficiently explored. Viewed in the context of Fett’s influence on conservation policy in Norway, Erling Viksjø’s design for the two new government buildings can be seen in dialogue with Fett’s principles of urban conservation.

Erling Viksjø and Harry Fett are considered to be on opposite sides of the debate that preceded the construction of a new government quarter and the demolition of the nineteenth-century listed hospital complex called Empirekvartalet designed by Christian Heinrich Grosch. Seemingly, Viksjø



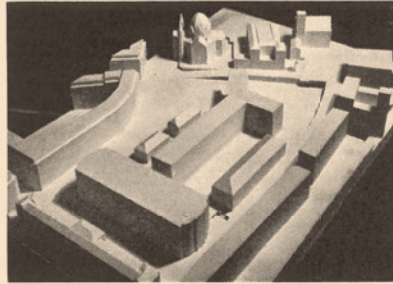
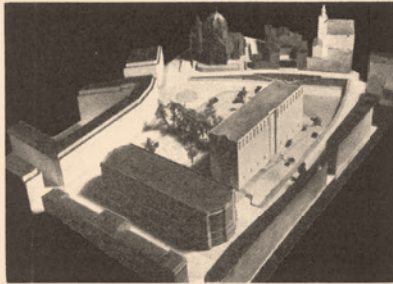
Vestibyle, Erling Viksjø’s
winning proposal of 1939

stands out as the winner, getting his modernist icons built, while Fett is the loser unable to rescue Empirekvartalet from demolition. Looking closer, the picture is less clear. Even though Fett retired in 1945 and his plea of protection was overruled, his authority played out in other ways. His ideas of urban conservation had struck root in the political and disciplinary landscape, and they arguably changed the course of the government building process.

The government buildings can be seen as the result of a negotiation between two opposing “ideologies”: *modernism* and *urban conservation*. The two government buildings appear to be conceived according to the first: solitary, freestanding buildings on pilotis, placed in a park, creating a secure distance to the surrounding historic city. On a closer look, we see that this modernist complex emerged in response to a dense configuration of historical buildings.

In 1939, when working on the competition for a new government quarter, Erling Viksjø was forced to confront the illusion of a Grand Master Plan that always has haunted Oslo. A common (mis)conception is that the city’s planners and politicians never have managed to follow through with a coherent plan, leaving behind a number of half-executed fragments: a collage city of partly conflicting schemes. Nowhere was this more evident than at Hammersborg in 1939: the apparent incoherency between the placement and design of Trinity Church (1858), Deichmanske Library (1933), the main fire station (1941), the Empirekvartalet (1807–26) and the old government building (1906). One could argue that the inconsistent ensemble represents a failure and a set of missed opportunities, but alternatively you could name this condition a particular *Oslo-essence*, reflecting distinct qualities and inherent principles of urban planning. Arguably, Viksjø took this into consideration when designing a new government quarter.

Looking into the process that led to the destruction of Empirekvartalet and the construction of Høyblokka and Y-blokka, it becomes apparent how much the idea of urban conservation evolved through negotiations between new and old. The competition brief asked for projects that respected the old government building from 1906, but neither the



Viksjø's proposal (left), and the proposal of the Antiquarian Building Committee (right)

governmental proposition that assigned the site nor the competition brief mentioned the old hospital quarter, treating its destruction as assumed. Forty-nine proposals were submitted, and in the spring of 1940 the jury selected four “winners,” none of which was found entirely suitable. Three of five members of the jury found the site inappropriate for the program, not because it housed an ensemble of prominent, listed hospital buildings, but due to “its inability to site a contemporary, monumental and practical governmental building complex.”⁶ The jury report mentions the old hospital briefly, stating that some of the proposals allowed for the temporary keeping of the old hospital building until the government building was completed.

In 1946, when Viksjø's proposal finally was selected among the four winners of the 1939 competition, it was partly because it would allow for the Empirekvartalet to be preserved, a fact that helped maneuver the building project through the protest storm that would follow. The project, now relocated so it would fit between the existing hospital buildings and downscaled and downgraded to a “government office building,” was only meant to be a temporary solution until a proper government building could be built. Erling Viksjø developed the project according to directions from the building committee, directions that implied the demolition of Empirekvartalet. The project was maneuvered “secretly” through the city council and the parliament without approval from either the Antiquarian Building Committee or the State Architect (equivalent to today's Statsbygg).

In 1949, a fierce public debate accelerated, becoming the first real preservation debate in Norway. The debate took place in the press and in public fora and included architects, antiquarians, politicians, writers, and prominent members of the “cultural elite.” The debate among architects, well documented in *Byggekunst*,⁷ the Norwegian journal of architecture, reflects a whole new attitude towards urban conservation. The uproar against the destruction of the Empirekvartalet was nearly unanimous, the opponents including the Antiquarian Building Committee, the State Architect, the Oslo regulation council, the editor of *Byggekunst*, and a row of prominent “modernist” architects such as Herman Munthe-Kaas, Gudolf Blakstad, Nicolai Beer, Knut Knutsen, Jens Selmer, and P.A.M. Mellbye.



Høyblokka placed among the existing hospital buildings, 1958

The Antiquarian Building Committee, led by the new Director General of the Directorate of Cultural Heritage (and Harry Fett's former right hand), Arne Nygård-Nilssen, presented an alternative proposal merging Erling Viksjø's project with the Empirekvartalet, preserving three of the four hospital buildings. The new building was centrally positioned on the northern façade of the Henrik Bull building and split in two angled wings when encountering the complex urban setting of Arne Garborgs plass. It is notable that the building took on the Y-shape that Viksjø would later pursue. The proposal was arguably not a convincing one, but in line with Harry Fett's (and Giovannoni's) ideas: inserting new functions into the existing urban fabric by partial demolition and by a reorientation of the urban space with a building of appropriate scale.

In response to public uproar, Viksjø developed a similar proposal in 1952 (now lost) that preserved some of the historical structures, among them a few of the hospital buildings and the allée of trees. The idea of a modernist, high-rise building threaded into the dense, historical urban fabric is quite radical, and most likely not in line with Viksjø's original intentions, but possibly inspired by (or governed by) the 1949 proposal of the Antiquarian Building Committee. The potential of this “urban conservation strategy” becomes apparent when contemplating photos of the newly completed Høyblokka still accompanied by all the hospital buildings.

Although the public debates certainly pushed Viksjø to alter his original scheme, his original proposal from 1939 already showed resonances with urban conservation strategies.

The positioning of the Høyblokka in his scheme echoed Stener Lenschow's initial design for the government quarter from 1891. His winning scheme (inherited and completed by Henrik Bull in 1906) had the form of a giant H that was destined to replace the entire hospital complex, but due to poor economy, only the southern “arm” of the building was completed. Viksjø not only performed the delicate balancing act of stepping among the existing buildings of Grosch, he also had to navigate in the haunted landscape of a project never realized. In Viksjø's many sketches, we can see how much attention he paid to the historical buildings of Grosch, Lenschow, and Bull. The perspective drawing from



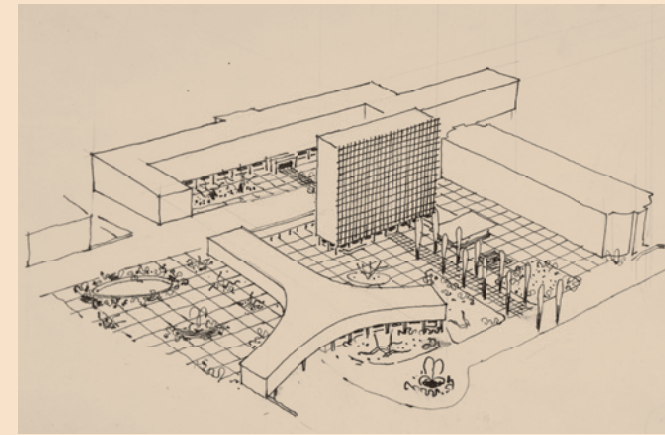
Viksjø's sketch of Høyblokka as the backdrop of Trinity Church

the competition proposal of 1939 clearly reveals how the building is symmetrically placed on the Bull building, completing the center part of the never-realized H-shaped scheme of Lenschow. Unlike the final version, the buildings are attached, and Høyblokka can be understood as Viksjø's "take" on Bull. This is accentuated by the fact that the ground floor of the glass building is rusticated, imitating the granite façade of Bull's building and the rusticated ground floor of Grosch's hospital buildings. The symmetrical façade of Viksjø, which in the 1939 version is formulated as a vertical niche in the full height of the building, alludes to the iconic, symmetrically placed entrances of the hospital building of Grosch.

It seems like Viksjø was struggling with two conflicting strategies of urban conservation: one is to resurrect the ghostly H-scheme of Lenschow, the other to commemorate the formal garden within the hospital quarter. He dealt with this partly by preserving the Linden allée that connected the hospital building to Akersgaten, now framing the entrance of Høyblokka. The 1939 rusticated ground floor would later be replaced by an "open" floor supported by pilotis (with their own form of rustication in sandblasted concrete patterns), allowing the public to move through the building, similar to the 1943 Ministry of Education and Health building in Rio de Janeiro.

Viksjø's façade choices for the Høyblokka positioned it as a backdrop for the existing historical monuments. In the final scheme, the glass skin of 1939 was replaced by a load-bearing concrete façade. The windows are set deep in the façade, giving minimal reflection and arguably attracting less attention than a glass façade would have done. The freehand sketches of Viksjø clearly show how the façade is conceived as a grid background for the surrounding buildings, giving Trinity Church, Deichmanske Library, and the Bull building their required attention. Whether this achieved the desired effect or not, it shows how persistently he tried to incorporate the surrounding buildings in his scheme. Viksjø is employing a "strategy of disguise," partly by lifting the building off the ground, partly by veiling it in a deep gridded façade.

Viksjø's decision to replace the stone cladding with an unclad concrete structure can also be understood as a way to adapt to the historical setting, acknowledging the surrounding load-bearing masonry façades: the bare brick façades of Trinity Church and the fire station, the stone façade of the



Erling Viksjø, Development of the government quarter, bird's-eye view, Akersgata, Oslo, 1958

Bull building, and the massive rustic foundations of Deichmanske Library. The *naturbetong*, invented by Viksjø and Sverre Jystad, a technique that by the use of sandblasting exposes the river-gravel aggregate of the concrete compound, turns the building into a mediator between historical and new building techniques.

The evolution of Y-blokka reveals a similar process of adjustment and response to historical context. The building appeared for the first time in a 1947 rendering in the shape of a small, one-story pavilion attached to Høyblokka. The building was small and obviously not born out of a need for more office space.

In 1952, it appeared as a freestanding, T-shaped, three-story building, not unlike the 1949 proposal from the Antiquarian Building Committee.

Arguably Viksjø was working according to the modernist convention of accompanying a vertical building with a horizontal one, in line with the 1952 UN building in New York, but there seem to be other strategies unfolding. The perspective drawings of the final version, following the inauguration of the Høyblokka in 1959, show the Y-blokka as a "framing device." On the one hand, the building divided Trinity Church and Deichmanske Library (whose designs were characterized by Viksjø as an unfortunate collision of styles⁸), and on the other hand it framed the views of passersby and established coherent urban spaces.

The decision to turn the building from a T into a Y is crucial: while the T created two concave corners and more static urban spaces, the Y ensured a continuous movement between the surrounding buildings. As a result, the building can be characterized as less a building than a mediator of existing urban spaces. Y-blokka, regarded by many as Viksjø's greatest invention, is a sort of non-monument, or at least a building that withdraws from the center stage, leaving it open to the other actors in play.

In hindsight, what apparently looks a collision of contradictory urban schemes reveals a deliberate and sophisticated strategy of urban conservation. Even though Erling Viksjø was under economic, political, and social pressure, and clearly was acting according to several design principles, he arguably was a practitioner of urban conservation. The influence of Harry Fett should not be underestimated: he gave fierce resistance to demolition



Viksjø's sketch of
Y-blokka framing
Trinity Church,
1957-58

and thereby influenced public opinion, and most importantly, he constructed a conceptual framework for urban conservation that would allow for the development and growth of the contemporary city of Oslo.

One would expect that urban planners and architects involved in the current planning process for a new government quarter would immerse themselves in the history of Hammersborg and the underlying strategies of Harry Fett and Erling Viksjø. It has not happened, perhaps due to a lack of interest and expertise, or an inability to establish multidisciplinary forms of collaboration. Erling Viksjø's government quarter is a rare and early example of urban conservation of the twentieth century. Our task is to establish an *urban conservation utopia* for the twenty-first century, and the new government quarter is the perfect place to start.

Notes

- 1 Francesco Bandarin and Ron van Oers, *The Historic Urban Landscape: Managing Heritage in an Urban Century* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), vii-xxiv.
- 2 Françoise Choay, *The Invention of the Historic Monument* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 131.
- 3 Lucia Allais, "Will to War, Will to Art," in *Cultural Internationalism and the Modernist Aesthetics of Monuments, 1932-1964* (PhD diss., MIT, 2008), 65.
- 4 Harry Fett, Peter Glen, and Kristin B. Aavitsland, "Continuity (1949)," *Future Anterior* 7, no. 2 (2010): 34-37.
- 5 Kristin B. Aavitsland, *Harry Fett: historien er lengst* (Oslo: Pax, 2014).
- 6 Jury report, *Byggekunst* 22 (1940): 44.
- 7 *Byggekunst* 5 (1949).
- 8 Erling Viksjø, "Det nye regjeringsbygget," *Byggekunst* 1 (1959): 3.