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## **ART AND POLITICS IN ARCHITECTURAL COMPETITIONS**

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### **Abstract**

This article analyses how architectural competitions serve as a context for architectural work embedded in broader strategies of urban development. The post-political mode of depoliticization has been argued to be important for contemporary practices in both urban theory and in architectural discourses. This article critically assesses how architects work within competitions and what potential lies in the process of challenging the post-political consensus. It uses a series of architectural competitions held within the Fjord City planning area in Oslo, Norway, as cases. Drawing from the work of Jacques Rancière, the article uses a framework for understanding political architecture that views aesthetics and politics as interconnected. The article argues that architecture can be political when this understanding is embraced and that architectural competitions, despite often leading to a depoliticized architecture, contain space for an architecture of dissensus.

Keywords:

Architecture competitions, Urban planning, Waterfront, politics, aesthetics

## 1 Introduction

In 2014, a jet-lagged and tired 84-year-old Frank Gehry flipped out reporters during a press conference when declaring that 98 percent of what gets built and designed today is pure shit. “There’s no sense of design nor respect for humanity or anything” (Winston, 2014), he stated. “Starchitecture” David Chipperfield lamented in an interview with the Financial Times in May 2018 that architecture and architects have lost their “social purpose” (Dalley, 2018). While, in April 2015, Reinier de Graaf (2015), a partner at the Koolhaas-founded Office for Metropolitan Architecture, wrote in the *Architectural Review* that “architecture is now a tool of capital, complicit in a purpose antithetical to its erstwhile ideological endeavour”. Such concerns for the state of contemporary architecture are not limited to architects themselves. While some have lamented the loss of architecture’s political engagement and social purpose since the mid-70s (Lahiji, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2016), others have argued that, in recent years, architects have increasingly engaged in social and political discourses (Richter et al., 2017). This has taken several forms, like the engagement with “social architecture” (Jones & Card, 2011) or, in architectural education, having students engage in design and build programs aimed at serving communities (Grubbauer & Steets, 2014).

Architectural competitions have been part of architectural training and practice for more than five centuries. The practice is deeply rooted within the architectural community (Bergdoll, 1989). Lipstadt (2009) argues that this is because competitions are when architects come closest to being artists. Architects, she contends, desire to be like artists but because of their dependence on others to finance and build their art, they do not enjoy the same autonomy as other artists.

The work presented here is part of a larger project that explores: (a) how architectural competitions are used and impact urban development and planning; and (b) how architectural competitions shape opportunities for engagement from different groups and what limits there are to this engagement.

In this article, the architectural competitions are approached as a space for architectural practice to uncover how architects themselves understand and operate within this space, with respect to engaging with social or political questions. The aim is to understand how the competition process creates barriers to political architecture and how it might, at the same time contain opportunities for political architecture. This is achieved by analysing a selection of architectural competitions and parallel assignments from within the Fjord City waterfront redevelopment in downtown Oslo. Parallel assignments are a mode of procurement of architectural services where a small number of firms (usually 3-4) are given a design task to solve. It is a type of work contract that is similar to other types of contracts for external consultancy services (see

1.1. below for further details). However, in my empirical material, there are examples of these processes leading to contracts for one of the participating firms and architects themselves treat these assignments as competitions. The study was conducted as an in-depth case-study based on qualitative data, including interviews with architects, planners and developers. This article answers the question: How does the architectural competition shape opportunities for architects to develop and advance projects with social and political purpose?

Aesthetics and politics are sometimes seen as separate concerns that may even conflict with each other. For instance, what Spencer (2016) calls the “affective turn” holds that there is nothing to analyse in architecture beyond aesthetic experience. Alternatively, what Rendell (2007) calls the “post-critical position” rejects social concerns and prioritises the atmospheric and the performative. Drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière (2010), a theoretical framework is developed that aims to understand aesthetics and politics as interconnected. This perspective is combined with the concept of “the right to the city”, first proposed by Lefebvre (1996) and later adopted by planners, geographers and architects (Stickells, 2011). This concept has been used to argue for the importance of public spaces and the fundamental right people have to make use of public spaces (Marcuse, 2014; Mitchell, 2003). It is a concept that has been mobilized by a large variety of social movements and activists (Mayer, 2009). The analysis is also anchored in the ongoing conversation about the depoliticization of planning, often labelled “post-politics” (Metzger et al., 2015; Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2015). The remainder of the article starts with an outline of the theoretical and analytical framework, before the findings are discussed, with a particular focus on working politically and working aesthetically. Following a discussion, the article concludes that architectural competitions can create barriers to social and political engagement. It proposes that a unified understanding of politics and aesthetics offers a potential means of achieving architecture with greater social and political engagement.

### 1.1 The Architectural Competition

Architectural competitions, despite dating back to Ancient Greece and becoming common during the renaissance (Barkhofen, 2016), have remained a fairly unresearched phenomenon until quite recently. Today, however, architectural competitions are an established field of research (Rönn et al., 2013) where architecture is viewed from a sociological perspective using Bourdieu (Dovey, 2005; Jones, 2011; Stevens, 2002). Working with this theory, Lipstadt (2009) argues that the competition is part of the mechanism that stratifies the social field of architecture by providing status to winners or the architects and firms that perform well in competitions. The competition is a situation of relative artistic freedom and, according to Lipstadt (2009) and Gutman (2010), it is where architects are most able to work as artists. Research on competitions has emphasized

the centrality of the competition brief and how architects interpret such documents. Kreiner (2013, p. 217) writes: “in an allegorical sense, each architect is ‘dancing’ with an absent partner”.

The lack of a regular client is a key element of the competition as a mode of architectural work. The client is replaced by a jury, but the competition also puts architects in more direct contact with the public. Kouzelis et al. (2010) see competition architecture as judged twice, first by the jury and then by the public. Svensson (2010) observes jury deliberations and finds that the architects on the jury often take charge of the process and that the evaluation is a meeting of architectural critique and common rationality (Svensson, 2013). Studying a development on Toronto’s waterfront, White (2014) analyses the potential for public participation in the evaluation stages of an architectural competition process.

Competitions makes architects relate to the public differently than in their regular work for private clients. One element is, as already mentioned above, that these projects are judged by the public. But as Van Wezemael (2012) argues, competitions can also shape public opinion or even consciousness. Competitions also change the rhetoric used by architects, as Tostrup (2009) contends, because architects must convince a much broader audience of their work’s value than when speaking among architects only. In short, the jury composition and public elements of competitions require architects to relate ideas to both professionals and non-professionals at the same time.

Choice of format is very important for understanding how power and agency is enabled in the competition process and, despite the importance of the brief and jury selection, the host relinquishes some degree of control when using open competitions (Bern & Røe, 2022). An open competition is one of several different competition formats. It is called “open” because anyone can enter their proposal. Other variations are, for example, limited competitions, where participants are either invited, and prequalified competitions, a formalised process where competitors apply and are judged by a predefined set of criteria. What here is called a “parallel assignment” seems to be specific to the Norwegian competition system, but similar processes may very well exist in other national competition systems. According to guidelines from the National Association of Norwegian Architects (NAL) it is not a competition at all, but rather a mode of service acquisition. Panel assignments are used to develop alternatives or explore different options for a site or problem. Task, deliverables, price and hours are pre-negotiated for the typically 3-4 participating firms. The material generated is then owned by the host as it would with any regular consultancy service (NAL & AIN, 2018).

## 2 Post-Politics and Dissensus

Recently, several researchers have argued that contemporary urban planning has become “post-political”. Post-politics is a specific form of depoliticization that drives the neo-liberal agenda forward, not based on repression of the political but on its foreclosure (Žižek, 2006, 2008). Ideological battles for power between opposing sides are replaced by collaboration and consensus based on technocratic and expert knowledge (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2015). The only questions that remain concern how to manage and govern society properly, using science, knowledge and technology to simply “do what works”. The process is described by Rancière (2010) as the transformation of politics into management. Political differences are reduced to policy problems to be solved and managed by experts and professionals; it is argued that this is already the norm, or at least an ongoing transformation (Metzger et al., 2015). Waterfront redevelopment is often used as an example of this process, particularly when based on concepts like the “creative city”. Waterfront developments are supposed to lead to improved competitiveness, making the city more attractive for both people and capital (Boland et al., 2017; Swyngedouw et al., 2002). The underlying issue of whether cities compete in a market in this way or if there are better modes of development are typically not open for debate. The purpose of post-political analysis is to provide a path towards real politics that can challenge and disrupt the neo-liberal consensus.

The political system is, according to Rancière, based on “a distribution of the sensible”. Rancière (2006, p. 12) defines this as: “the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it”. “The distribution of the sensible” describes the distribution of positions and resources within a community. It structures what is common and what is exclusive; it relates to who is counted and those who are not counted, seen, or not seen, heard, or not heard, who belongs or who is the other. However, it also concerns the different sense-experiences these positions offer and deny different people. The distribution is also spatial, Rancière (2003, p. 201) writes:

*In the end, everything in politics turns on the distribution of spaces. What are these places? How do they function? Why are they there? Who can occupy them? For me, political action always acts upon the social as the litigious distribution of places and roles. It is always a matter of knowing who is qualified to say what a particular place is and what is done in it.*

Dissensus is any act or effort to change this distribution in a way that gives a part to those that had no part, meaning a change towards equality. The demand to take part in experiences denied to certain groups – the

demand to be heard and counted – is political. Creating and experiencing art, when exercised in opposition to one’s proper place and time, is also a political act of emancipation according to Rancière (2012).

## 2.1 Aesthetics and Dissensus

Aesthetics is, in this context, not simply a theory of art or beauty but rather what constitutes the sensible experience, particularly the sensible experience of one’s given position in a society (Rancière & Gage, 2019). The aesthetic question concerns the following: “a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience” (Rancière, 2006, p. 13). Understood this way, the distribution of the sensible is both a theory of politics and aesthetics. Politics then has both an aesthetic and a spatial dimension. True politics, or rather what Rancière calls “dissensus”, occurs when people make themselves visible or heard and where those who did not share in certain sensible experiences claim their part in them. Rancière (2012) demonstrates these different distributions of sensible experiences when writing about the working class in the book *Proletarian Nights*. Here, he uses archival material to illustrate how some members of the French working class in the middle of the 19th century sought to extend the sensible experiences of their lives by using their free time (often at night) to learn how to read or write, write poetry or pursue other expressive practices. The sensible experience of a worker is the accumulated feelings, impressions, ideas and experiences the worker carries with him. As such, sensible experiences are both temporal and spatial: where you belong at a given time and where you are a stranger in that particular time or context.

On this basis, artistic practices can be understood as a means of making and doing that maintains these forms of visibility and spatiality or intervenes in their distribution. The culture of Hip-Hop might be considered to contain examples of such practices. DJing was a new way of making music that used a minimal set of resources in two turntables, a mixer and a record collection – in short, the opportunity to create music – a new sensible experience for many people without access to instruments or music education. MCing, furthermore, was a new type of poetry that represented a way of life and conditions for life that had no place in current culture. Similarly, the graffiti artist seeks to take control of the aesthetics of urban spaces, which they would otherwise have little way of impacting. Rancière himself uses the erecting of barricades in Paris during the riots of the 19th century as a form of architecture that intervenes in the distribution of experiences in a city that is both visual, spatial and highly political (*Architecture Exchange: Jacques Rancière | Session 3: Jacques Rancière and Discussion*, 2019).

At this point, it is evident how true politics and aesthetic practices can indeed be one and the same when they seek to change the distribution

of the sensible towards a more equal distribution. At the core of both politics and aesthetics is the following question: “who has the capacity to be a political subject and what form of sensible experience produces or forbids that capacity?” (Rancière & Gage, 2019, p. 10).

## 2.2 Post–Politics in Architecture

As in planning, (Metzger et al., 2015; Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2015) some have argued that architecture has become post-political. According to Lahiji (2014) and Spencer (2016), architecture has replaced politics with management and expertise, both when it comes to its social and political dimensions and importantly also in aesthetics. Architecture has become purely about aesthetics (in the traditional meaning – not as it is used by Rancière). It has also been reduced to being about aesthetic affect, meaning the pre-reflexive immediate experience of beauty rather than something to reflect over, discuss or critique. Lahiji (2014) and Spencer (2016) offer an aesthetic interpretation of post-politics as a retreat from politics, based on the argument that architecture is an art and is therefore beyond politics. Architecture without politics is architecture that has abandoned having wider social purpose, or in other words, any meaning or function outside of its immediate direct utility. Koolhaas expresses this limiting of architecture to a narrow understanding of aesthetics when he says that:

*Neo-liberalism has turned architecture into a “cherry on the cake” affair. The Elbphilharmonie is a perfect example: It’s icing on the cake. I am not saying that neo-liberalism has destroyed architecture. But it has assigned it a new role and limited its range* (Oehmke & Rapp, 2011, para. 40).

Similar developments have been noted by other writers, such as Murphy (2012), who sees the retreat towards management as a parallel to the retreat in other design disciplines towards problem-solving, arguing that contemporary architecture is dominated by the idea of “solutionism”. Here, politics is replaced by rational design and management based in the sciences of architecture, design and engineering. The task of architecture is simply then to find optimal solutions through the proper use of technology and expertise. Further, the rise of iconicism in architecture is often seen as an expression of an architecture “liberated” from social obligations, making it “free to serve the market” (Dunham-Jones, 2014, p. 152). Understood as part of the post-modern turn in architecture, iconicism also coincides with the establishment of the starchitect milieu (Jencks, 2011): a class of creative, globetrotting, famous designers that provides instantly recognisable landmark architecture used to create commercial spaces and generate economic growth (Faulconbridge, 2010; McNeill, 2009; Sklair, 2017).

The need for financing and adherence to existing laws and regulations is an important context for all architectural projects. Given this restriction, the question becomes: What form can a political architectural practice take? If architectural competitions offer a moment of relative autonomy in terms of aesthetics, it stands to reason that they should offer the same in terms of politics. At the same time, architectural competitions are closely related to the creation of iconic architecture. Within the discourse on architectural competitions among architects and architectural scholars, there seems to be a consensus on architecture leading to high-quality, prestigious and innovative architecture. The rhetoric of the architectural competition, as studied by Tostrup (2009), is centred on the competition being a process that finds the best project. In a similar argument, when considering architecture as a social field, Lipstadt (2009) sees the competition as an important mechanism for distributing status within the field.

### 2.3 Political architecture and the right to the city

Yaneva (2017) has suggested that there are different ways to make architecture political, depending on what one defines as architecture or where in the architectural process one focuses. Here, the focus is on architectural competitions and how architects work in competitions, meaning that the study concerns the process of architectural production and creation rather than finished buildings; in other words, it relates to what is called “paper architecture” because it exists only as a representation at the point of analysis (Larson, 1995). Pugalis & Giddings (2011) have proposed the concept of “little victories” as a method of operationalising the “right to the city” in architectural production, thus building a framework for revitalising political engagement among architects.

The right to the city is a well-known concept within urban geography and planning that was first articulated by Lefebvre as a right to urban life, to participation and appropriation of the city’s moments and places (Lefebvre, 1996). This was subsequently used and interpreted in several ways (Revol, 2014), with Harvey (2013) providing a broad interpretation that views the right to the city as a collective right to shape the processes of urbanisation and how cities are made and re-made.

The concept of little victories that represent piecemeal changes or challenges allows this highly generalised concept to become embedded in concrete social practices in a constructive and productive manner. Little victories are moments when something is achieved against the logic of the dominant system. As a concept, little victories have both negative and positive interpretations (Pugalis & Giddings, 2011). The hope is that little victories accumulate and, over time, lead to larger changes. But there is a risk that little victories never add up to real change. However, most changes are gradual, and political architecture could provide support to alternative and oppositional movements, as Kaminer (2017) has

argued. Among his examples is the atelier d'architecture autgérée (Studio for Self-Managed Architecture) and their engagement in community gardening and the reformist movement of the post-war years.

In this article, the right to the city is used to provide a more concrete notion of what “real politics” (or dissensus) looks like. An architecture that extends this right to more people or to different contexts is understood as an architecture of dissensus because it redistributes urban space and the experience of the city towards equality. The Rancierian perspective on aesthetics and politics provides a dimension of experience and of sensibility to the right to the city, and in this way articulates and extends the substantial content of this right. On the other side, the right to the city provides a framework for understanding actions, both individual and collective, taken to extend this right to more people and places as acts of dissensus. This merger of politics and aesthetic experience is not new; it has arguably often been part of the fight for workers emancipation and is articulated simply by the slogan made famous by the Lawrence textile strike of 1912: “We want bread – and roses too” (Kornbluh et al., 2011, p. 159).

### 3 Method

The methodology used is a qualitative case-study with a triangulation of sources, data and method of analysis (Natow, 2019). The case-study is a nested case, or a case-within-a-case (Lotz-Sisitka & Raven, 2004; Mills et al., 2010). The Fjord City redevelopment is the case, and the competitions held as part of this redevelopment area comprise the set of nested cases, or subcases.

The study is based on two large collections of empirical material, one consisting of interviews and the other of documents from the competition and planning process. This is further supported by the analysis of a comprehensive media archive of news and trade press, both printed and published online between January 2000 to July 2016. In total, 955 items were analysed. The interviews were conducted in two periods from the fall of 2017 to the fall of 2018 and during the winter of 2019/2020. There are 23 semi-structured qualitative interviews with 10 architects and 1 landscape architect, as well as with 3 property developers, 6 planners and bureaucrats (mid-level department managers or caseworkers) from the municipal planning office and public-private organizations and 3 politicians from various political parties. This diversity of informants is important because competitions are embedded in the broader planning system. Source triangulation is also particularly important when using elite interviews to avoid their preferred narratives to dominate and to add nuances and perspectives (Natow, 2019). Most architects are best categorised as professionals rather than members of the elite (Deamer, 2015), but among my informants there was a clear bias towards people

in leadership positions, those whom Delaney (2007) calls organizational elites.

The aim of this research was to understand how informants understand their role in – and their views and opinions about – how architectural competitions are used in urban planning. These elements are used to understand the perceived and utilized space of action that architects experience in the competition process. Most interviews were recorded and later transcribed, though others relied on note-taking in real time. Relatively few people participate in any one competition, and the architectural and planning community in Oslo is fairly small. Therefore, in order to secure the anonymity of informants, individual interviewees are not connected to particular competitions. While there is a risk that some information may be lost as a result, anonymity must take precedence. The fact that all the competitions used as cases took place within the same institutional, legal and geographic contexts will help the analysis, as cross-case variation is greatly reduced.

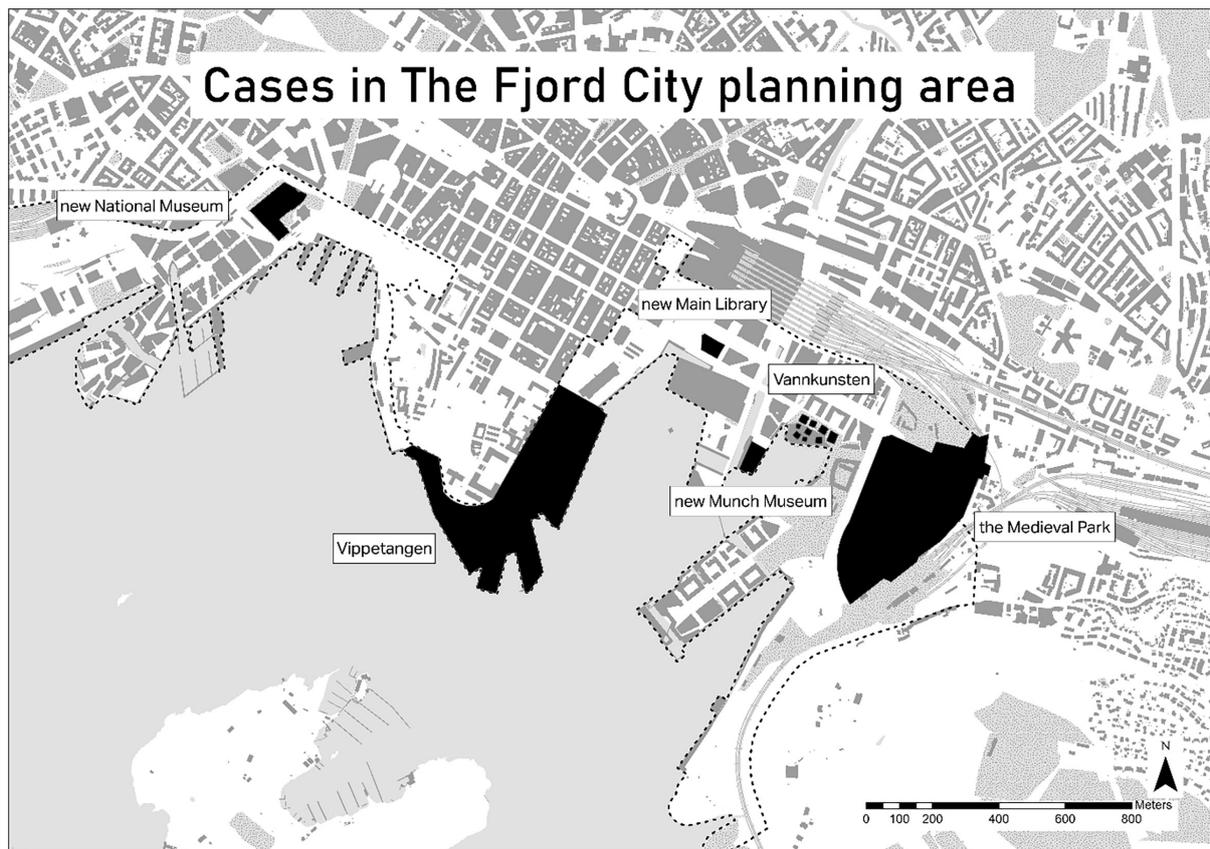
The supporting document analysis focused on competition programmes, jury/evaluation reports, planning documents, promotional material and other documents related to the planning or the political process of the cases.

Interviews were transcribed so that all material could be coded in the QACDAS package NVivo. Coding was both based on pre-defined codes developed from existing literature as well as theory and codes that emerged during the research process.

### 3.1 Case selection and Context

The Fjord City development was chosen as a case because there have been many competitions and parallel assignments used at different stages and in different ways throughout the process. The Fjord City plan calls for the use of architectural competitions or studies of alternatives before important planning decisions are made. The Fjord City plan (Oslo Municipality, 2008, p. 20) states the purpose of this requirement is to: “secure the quality of planning proposals, create a better foundation for decision making and an open decision-making process before important decisions are made; both independent expertise and public-planning expertise shall be included in the making and evaluation of alternatives” [authors’ translation].

The selection of subcases was done strategically to achieve a good mix of competition types. Figure 1 gives an overview of the Fjord City planning area and selected cases.



### 3.1.1 Planning in Oslo and the Fjord City plan

With a change to the “Harbour Act” adopted by the national legislature in 2002, Oslo Harbour, a municipally-owned company, was granted the rights to develop and sell property if sufficient funds were secured to pay for the upkeep, modernization or re-localization of harbour activities. This further enabled a set of public–private partnerships to be established in order to redevelop the harbourfront across the entirety of downtown Oslo. The most important one to note here is HAV Eiendom AS, a subsidiary of Oslo Harbour set up to be its property developer. Since 1985, planning has become increasingly market-based, with 90% (national aggregate) of adopted municipal plans originating in the private sector (Falleth et al., 2010). Growth and market-oriented discourses now tend to prevail in Oslo’s planning debates, particularly when coupled with discourse on green technology innovation (Hanssen & Saglie, 2010). This change in planning is part of a more general shift towards neo-liberalism in Norwegian politics; however, the standing of the social-democratic welfare state remains strong in Norway, and the shift towards neo-liberalism has been tempered somewhat by this tradition (Sager, 2014).

Waterfront development, as a planning concept, has become part of many cities’ urban development since the 1970s (Avni & Teschner, 2019;

Figure 1  
Cases in the Fjord City planning area  
(Data sources: Geovekst/Oslo Municipality). The black fields show the building footprints or planning areas of each case.

Breen & Rigby, 1996). Chang & Huang (2010) examine the waterfront development in Singapore; Sandercock and Dovey (2002) study the waterfront development in Melbourne; Holgerson in Malmö; White (2016) in Toronto; Balke et al. (2017) in Hamburg; and Desfor & Jørgensen (2004) in Copenhagen, to highlight only a few. Generally, these projects are aimed towards profitability and the competitiveness of cities (Boland et al., 2017; Swyngedouw et al., 2002) and these outcomes are prioritised above social equity or inclusion (Andersen & Røe, 2016) due to the creation of upscale environments that can exclude wider publics (Cheung & Tang, 2015).

The Fjord City plan clearly shows, in both development and implementation, a strong neo-liberalist influence in its adoption of what Harvey (1989) calls an entrepreneurial mode of planning. It aims to develop the waterfront to make Oslo more attractive to business, investments, the creative class (Florida, 2004) and tourists through innovative, high-quality architecture and a diverse offering of services and experiences. Diversity is a central element to the plan, but diversity of services, activities and functions are more clearly defined than what diversity would mean in terms of people. At the same time, there is an emphasis on high-quality public spaces and the creation of areas accessible to everyone. The implementation is done at arm's length, through public-private partnerships that function as supposedly independent agencies. They are called supposedly independent here because there is some controversy over how politically controlled or how independent these organisations are and should be. Since these organisations are not subsidiary to the municipal planning office, they must submit plans and proposals to the municipal planning office as if they were private companies.

The city council instructed its planning office to create a plan to redevelop the waterfront in 2000, but the Fjord City plan was not adopted until 2008. However, waterfront development was pursued actively even prior to 2000. The first step in the development process occurred after Aker mechanical yard closed in the mid-1980s and the old industrial area was rapidly developed into an area mixing business, particularly legal and financial services, with an offering of high-class dining, retail and apartments. Along the old pier, ships and barges were turned into restaurants and several chain restaurants opened new locations along the waterfront, drawing huge crowds during the warmer months. Inspiration for this waterfront development was drawn from waterfront developments in Baltimore and other cities (Butenschøn, 2011). Both Aker Brygge and its extension to Tjuvholmen were developed following the same template (Ellefsen, 2017). Aker Brygge became one of the most attractive parts of the city, and its apartments are among the city's most expensive. While the area appears public it is, in reality, private property, and it is tightly controlled by private security.

Most of the real estate within the Fjord City area is owned by the municipality of Oslo through Oslo Harbour. When the harbour laws were changed, Oslo Harbour also set up its own development firm called HAV Eiendom AS, to which it transferred ownership of all its holdings within the Bjørvika area (see Figure 1). The Bjørvika area was owned by Oslo Harbour and the Norwegian state through Entra ASA (a real estate holding company that is 8.2% state-owned) and Bane NOR Eiendom AS (a Norwegian Railroads real estate company). Entra ASA and Bane NOR Eiendom AS chose to partner with private property developer Lindstow AS, which is privately owned by the Awilhelmsen investment company. Together they form the real estate development company Oslo S Development (OSU). HAV Eiendom is the organisation behind many of the competitions used as cases here. They submit their projects for re-regulation and apply for building permits as if they were a private company. Oslo's municipal planning authority submits, at least formally, any external proposals through the same application procedures. In two of the cases studied, the planning authority is the host and organiser of the process; here they are embedded in the planning authorities' own processes of planning.

### 3.1.2 Cases

Six different cases have been studied here; three of them follow a version of the traditional format and three are so-called parallel assignments as defined above. While all six cases contribute to the present analysis, the new Munch Museum will receive more attention because of certain particularities that are unique to this case. On the direction of the city government, HAV Eiendom AS announced two competitions, one for the aforementioned new museum for Norwegian painter Edvard Munch and one for the new Main Library. HAV Eiendom AS was, according to informants, selected for this task because of their arms-length distance from the city council and the planning department and their capacity to execute projects quickly. Given the size of the project some competition processes were mandated through rules of public procurement. The architecture competition fulfils this requirement. They wrote competition briefs, they recruited the jury and, for the invited component, they selected which architects to invite. The competition programs called for architecture of the highest quality and for concepts with a clear identity, emphasizing the need for a "unique character" and a building that would become a "landmark" and "destination". Both programmes also included housing or mixed uses for adjacent lots in the Bjørvika plan. The format used in both competitions was a version of a limited competition with ten invited and ten prequalified teams. This was done to ensure proposals from firms of sufficient status and capacity. An open competition always contains the risk of a small or inexperienced firm winning. According to several different informants (among architects, planners and developers), this risk is often seen as unacceptable. The buildings were very close to each other, so the juries, while separate, held a com-

mon meeting towards the end of their process to avoid conflicts in their recommendations. The winner of the Munch Museum competition was the Lambda project by the Spanish Studio Herreros, which featured a tall tower on a larger base of ground floors. The top floors were angled slightly forward, consisting primarily of glass and aluminium. It was presented in its renderings as an exceptionally bright and light building. The competition jury described it as follows: “The project has all the qualities of a monumental building and manages to pay the necessary respect to the existing zoning plan. The external architecture of Lambda is light and communicative. Its volume presents itself as alive” (Munch Museum jury, 2009, p. 21).

The Munch Museum’s height, appearance and location became part of a lengthy and controversial process. The project was (and is) repeatedly accused of being an ugly building (recent examples: Enge et al., 2019; Lea & Grønneberg, 2019; Rossavik, 2020). Controversy and its resolution are documented in more detail in Bern (2017), but some key elements that are important to the current analysis should be considered, which, unless otherwise noted, are based on the media archive. After the announcement of the winner, some argued in newspaper op-eds that a new competition was necessary. This was met with vehement protests from architects and their organisation, NAL. Simply not building the winning submission because some called it ugly would be detrimental to Oslo’s reputation among architects. Rather quickly, two opposing positions developed in the media discourse (and on social media (Bern 2017)), one for and one against the project. Those in favour of the project mostly argued that tall buildings would provide an appropriate context for Munch’s work and that he deserved pride of place in downtown Oslo with a striking and iconic building. The group opposed to the building were less unified in their arguments; some objected to the location and the process on political grounds, others on economic grounds. The building was also criticised for not adhering to existing planning regulations. The debate was, in many ways, quite superficial. From the jury report, it is clear that most of the other proposed projects, including the 2nd and 3rd prize winners, would have deviated even more from existing area and regulatory plans (Munch Museum jury, 2009). The controversy delayed the project for a few years until a deal was struck between the ruling Conservative Party led coalition and the Socialist Left Party of the opposition. They exchanged support for the new museum for an area-based development program in the neighbourhood where the old museum used to be located (Bern 2017).

The new main library followed the same limited competition format as the Munch Museum competition, with ten invited teams and ten selected through prequalification. This competition did not entirely evade criticism for its modernist appearance, but it never became controversial and passed through its regulatory process without any notable



issues. The jury congratulated the concept of the Norwegian winners, LundHagem, because it incorporated commercial areas into the project. The jury wrote the following: “The concept creates a very urban unity of the library and the commercial areas, while at the same time allowing the library to stand out in its uniqueness” (Deichmanske Jury, 2009, p. 21). As with the Munch Museum, the project was developed further by HAV Eiendom AS, who submitted their requested regulatory changes to the municipal office and later for political approval – a process that proved much smoother for this building than for the Munch Museum.

The degree of independence from political control that HAV Eiendom AS enjoys is, however, subject to disagreement among informants. Having successfully, at least in the view of politicians, led these two projects, their position as a strategic development organisation was strengthened. Informants with experience within HAV Eiendom AS, however, made it clear that they know very well that they operate on delegated power; power that could be delegated elsewhere if politicians preferred.

In 2009, Statsbygg (the national government’s property developer) held its competition for the new National Museum at a site close to Aker Brygge (see Figure 1). This competition used a 2-phase format with an open first round and a limited second round. In the open phase 237 teams submitted proposals. From among these, six teams were invited to compete

**Figure 2**  
**The Munch Museum.**

EXTERIOR PHOTO BY ADRIA GOULA, CCA LICENSE.



in a final phase two. Once again, a rhetoric of high-quality architecture was central to the brief. The jury awarded the victory to German/Italian firm Kleihues + Schuwerk. The winning project was described as follows by the jury: “The glowing hall, the project’s dominating visual element, helps make the museum a monumental building whose elegance is found in the fact that it is horizontal in contrast to the area’s existing verticality” (Nationalmuseet Jury, 2010, p. 12). They concluded the following: “It is the view of the jury that the project has monumentality but is simultaneously low-key” (Nationalmuseet Jury, 2010, p. 14).

**Figure 3**  
**The new Main Library.**

PHOTO: ERIK THALLAUG / FOTOFOLK

The new library opened in June 2020, the Munch Museum opened in October 2021 and the National Museum opened in June 2022. Just like HAV Eiendom AS, Statsbygg is treated as external and subject to the same procedures and requirements as any private entity when seeking re-regulation and building permits from the municipal planning office.

The Medieval Park and Vippetangen are two parallel assignments from 2013, organized by Oslo City with 3 invited architect offices. Both were initiated by municipal planning authorities, who aimed to develop areas for recreation and some mixed-use buildings. The Medieval Park is the site of the very first settlements in Oslo and has some elements that are subject to strict heritage protection. Vippetangen (named after the tipping light that supposedly once stood there) also has a couple of buildings seen as worthy of protection but is subject to a less strict regulation than the Medieval Park. The competition programmes asked for safe, attractive areas suitable for year-round use. They exploited the possibility of the parallel assignment format and gave the teams slightly



different tasks and priorities; teams were assigned and did not choose which version to work on. These assignments were held as part of the municipal planning office's own planning work. The outcome is, therefore, part of a wider initiative involving regulation and area plans rather than single projects.

The final case is a parallel assignment called B6A/B6B organized by HAV Eiendom AS and included 4 invited architectural offices. As one might guess from its name, this was not a very high-profile project. It received no media coverage. Its name was derived from lot names in the Bjørvika regulation plan, and the project was for housing along the promenade spanning the length of the Fjord City area. The programme asked for architecture and apartments, taking advantage of the extraordinary location. The guidelines from the National Association of Norwegian Architects clearly stated that there should not be winners in parallel assignments (NAL & AIN, 2018). HAV Eiendom AS secured permission to build the winning project, Vannkunsten (Vannkunsten is the Norwegian spelling of the name of the winning Danish firm, Vandkunsten, and translates to "water art") before they sold the project and the real estate to OSU. It is now mostly sold out at prices per square meter nearing two-and-a-half times that of the 2018 city average. Vandkunsten was awarded the contract because their proposal is probably the cheapest to build; at the same time, it is assumed to give the highest average sale prices.

Figure 4  
National Museum.

PHOTO: IWAN BAAN

In this consideration, it is emphasised that the “marked identity in itself will increase the price of the housing units”. This quote is from an unpublished evaluation report from HAV Eiendom AS and external consultants that was shared by informants.



#### 4 The view from inside the competition process

As discussed above, the architectural competition has the potential to be a moment of increased autonomy for architects (Lipstadt, 2009), can bring architects closer to the public and operates as a design process based on a brief rather than dialogue with a client. The conceptual framework for what constitutes political architecture, or an architecture of dissensus, is the basic perspective used in the analysis of the cases. Given the current situation in planning and architecture, argued in this article to be dominated by post-politics, the expectation is that actual dissensus or attempts at political architecture will be the exception rather than the rule. Therefore, this section approaches the architectural competition as a particular context for architectural work and focuses on how competition procedures shape the praxis of architecture, in particular, the potential for competition processes to lead to architectures of dissensus. In other words, cases are analysed to build an understanding of the potential and the barriers to political architectural work. This is mainly achieved by discussing the process and some aspects of it with a set of informants. Autonomy was a central theme in the interviews conducted. This included both the relationship between architects and clients, how they related to competition briefs and how competitions might change how architects think about the public and for whom they

Figure 5  
Vannkunsten.  
PHOTO: AUTHOR

design. The idea of diversity is also discussed because it is central in the Fjord City plan and can be related to the question of who you design or build a city for.

#### 4.1 Autonomy

The following section focuses on the architectural competition as a particular context of autonomy for architectural work and how architects, planners and developers partake in this process. The views of the architects are outlined first, before relevant answers from the other groups of informants are considered.

The architects interviewed did see the competition as a mode of practicing architecture that is different from collaborating directly with clients. They explained that while competitions may not offer the kind of freedom enjoyed by a painter or songwriter, they provide a way to work without direct interference from clients until the presentation of final concepts. Private clients, they said, are often more hands-on in trying to shape projects in their early stages. Competitions create a space for experimentation; if not in the end result, then at least in the project phase. Some also emphasized that the amount of freedom they enjoyed in this phase depended on their reason for entering the competition. "Sometimes you enter competitions more to get noticed than to win", a senior partner in a mid-sized firm said. Getting noticed increases a firm's competitiveness through affording it a better position within the field of architecture, as well as in the eyes of those that procure architecture and consider prequalification applications. This potential element of freedom and autonomy in process is also a potential space for politics to enter the architectural process, but it seems that creativity or artistic freedom is what this space is usually used for.

Innovation, learning and business development can also be benefits derived from participating in a competition, particularly those that require multidisciplinary teams. "Maybe you do it to develop competency in specific subjects like energy efficiency or zero-emission houses, or to create contacts with entrepreneurs and engineers", said the same senior partner. "It might not be radical new buildings, but the innovation in building technology, sustainable and green architecture is very real", an architect with extensive jury experience said.

On the other hand, some of the informants emphasized that they are always "in it to win it" because, while all the other benefits may be real, they can only turn a profit and keep their business going if they are rewarded contracts for actual buildings. There is a limit to the number of competitions in which an architect can participate without winning before this becomes an economic problem. The prize money from competitions is usually not enough to cover basic costs, meaning that firms that are not rewarded with a building contract lose money on competitions.

Even the informants who were most eager to emphasize different strategies for competition participation were clear that, sooner or later, these strategies had to lead to contracts of some sort, or they would go out of business. The financial losses incurred in competitions not won seemed to be understood as simply the cost of doing business. The importance of winning may, in many cases, force a different priority or even preclude working any kind of politics into the work. Challenging the framework of existing plans is often done but challenging the politics of current modes of urban planning and development can conflict with the idea of winning competitions.

#### 4.2 Designing for diversity

The operationalisation of politics as an effort to expand the right to the city, as delineated above, finds its closest parallel within the Fjord City plan and its emphasis on diversity. An effort towards a more diverse city would in certain ways be a means of extending the right to the city to more people or giving people the right to more of the experiences the city offers. Informants were asked about how they engaged with the goal of diversity and what, if anything, they did to pursue this goal.

The architects tended to focus their answers on how, when designing housing, they make sure that there is a good mix of apartment sizes and room configurations. While small one-bedroom or studio apartments are the most profitable, too many such apartments are not desirable when the intent is to create a sense of community. It is assumed that immigrants tend to have bigger families and more multi-generational households, so ensuring a good selection of apartments with several bedrooms is seen as necessary for diversity.

When it comes to diversity in economic class, the question becomes more difficult. The architects generally had little to say about this. Most emphasized that it is the market, and not the architect, which sets prices and that profit lies in the difference between the building costs and the market price. Others added that they would happily try to minimize costs but observed that there is little interest in such efforts. Many also noted that location has a greater impact on sale price than building costs. For projects that are for the larger public, like the Main Library and the Munch Museum, the architects said they focus more on how to create features that are freely available and attempt to design plans that will accommodate a diverse set of activities. The architects all had some notion of making spaces "for everyone"; when asked if they have a target audience when developing designs, they all responded with some variation on "everyone and anyone". The architects wanted their buildings to "give back" to the city quality spaces that could be of use. One of the architects interviewed defined it thus: "Architecture is the emptiness between the buildings; the buildings are important – they are the walls". Another senior architect said, "All humans are the same; if you

make good urban spaces, it will facilitate encounters between them". A third architect provided a slightly different view, saying that it would be quite dangerous to think in terms of target audiences because, when planning, one can never know exactly who will want to be in the space or use the space; as such, one must think in general terms when designing urban spaces. Their answers all suggest that once realised, architects have minimal influence on a building's use and reception and that, while architects recognise competitions as a moment of relative autonomy, there are many constraints in what they feel is achievable through their designs alone.

### 4.3 Challenging the Competition

Existing plans and policies define important boundaries for the design task in competitions; these plans and policies can and must sometimes be challenged by the architects. Among the cases presented here the Munch Museum, National Library and the National Museum, required re-regulation after the architectural competition. The three parallel assignments were part of the process of developing more detailed plans for the given areas.

Most of the architects did talk about pushing developers and the municipality during the development phase that follows a competition, mostly through fighting for architectural quality and attempting to preserve important aspects of their concept, but also in terms of smaller details such as the choice of materials. While the architects did not see themselves as artists like painters or poets, they did view their work as artistic and creative. They saw themselves as designers who give form to ideas and offer creative solutions for practical problems. They sought to create high-quality architecture, to give the city good spaces and give people good places to live. They expressed a willingness to engage in discussion and to fight to convince developers and municipal planners to do things that could reduce profits but increase the quality of the architecture, thus improving the building's immediate surroundings and the wider city. Again, this is indicative of a potential to extend architecture into the political or even towards an architecture of dissensus. But the autonomy of the competition is used in a different way.

A few of the architects interviewed emphasized that winning competitions gave them more strength in subsequent contract negotiations and even during the building process. In the end, the competition gives the winning architect better control over the final product. The public nature of some competitions makes the threshold for walking away from the winning firm during negotiation and development more difficult for the host organization since the firm's architects and their ideas were already determined to be the best.

All the developers and municipal and public-private planners interviewed stated that they welcomed and expected such discussion but also needed to be mindful of the bottom line. They expressed a willingness to accept trade-offs, to take less profit or even a loss on one part of a development if other parts were of sufficient profitability. Developers thought about their reputation and standing in the community of architects, planners, politicians and developers, at least to a degree. They seemed to be proud of the times where they chose to forgo profits to do something they perceived as good for the city and society. But they never shied away from the fact that profit must always be secured; if there is no profit, projects cannot be realized. This is important because private interest is a key part of how public-private partnerships are run, and because the realisation of non-legally binding plans such as Fjord City depend on compatibility with the logic of private capital to realise any project that is not publicly funded. The B6A/B6B – Vannkunsten – is the best example of this, developed by HAV Properties AS to be sold, along with the real-estate, to a private developer as a ready-to-build project.

Within the public-private sector, informants emphasized that, given the political nature of their mandate, they could go further than the purely private developers in eschewing profits for other types of benefits. Those who worked in the organizations that operate as private enterprises, but are owned by the municipality, saw themselves as under political control. "If we were to do something that the city council really disapproved of, a change of leadership would be imminent", said a former harbour bureaucrat.

One clear example of transcending the competition program and challenging its parameters in terms of architectural content can be found in the Munch Museum's winning proposal. The building is laid out in a way that gives access to the rooftop independent of the rest of the building. For iconic projects, the norm is to maximise spaces that can be used for profit over public spaces (Sklair, 2017). The rooftop in the Munch Museum is envisioned as a public space where access is not dependent on a museum ticket or dependent on one being a consumer in one of the museum's shops or restaurants. This has meant that a potentially very lucrative piece of property is turned into a public space rather than being used for commercial purposes, as would be the norm. How this is implemented in practice will determine if the space actually functions as a public space or not. The best information available at the time of writing is that this has been built as drawn by the architects. This could be regarded as a "little victory" as Pugalis & Giddings (2011) define them. It could also be interpreted as a meaningless gesture or small concession to secure the broader project; however, given the controversy surrounding the project, it would probably have been used in an effort to secure support for the project, but it was never brought up by any of the project's proponents. The public-access rooftop is not even mentioned

in the jury report. If successful, creating non-commercial spaces within the hyper-commercial space of a waterfront development, a space for anyone to enjoy regardless of purchase power within an iconic building whose role is to attract capital and the people who hold or can generate it, is indeed an extension of the right to the city. More people will, in such a case, have a right to a larger part of the city and in this case an aerial view of the city is such a rare commodity it makes it a right to a way of experiencing the city. Outside of interviews with key informants, no reference to this feature was found in any empirical material. The competition brief asks for spaces for recreation in general terms and does specify that there should be space for dining and retail in connection to the museum. As "little victories" go, this is a clear example of extending the experience of a particular urban space beyond the normally narrow commercial practice. If successful, it could perhaps lead more people to understand that one can demand more, even from iconic architectural projects.

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 Post-Politics

The architectural competition is a process that provides an ambiguous kind of freedom to architects. They perceive competitions as a moment of more design freedom than the norm or as an opportunity to work more independently. At the same time, however, architects view themselves as limited by the particularities of a project's overall ambitions and specifications, which provide a narrow definition of what architecture is and should be in the cases analysed here. In the case of the Fjord City project, the competition brief and spatial programme set out clear constraints on what could be realized. Based in a belief in themselves as design experts, architects are more willing to challenge the context and its constraints for the sake of architectural elements, rather than engaging in issues that might be perceived as political or social. The technicalities of formats, hosts, briefs and juries and the respective level of influence and power they exercise are significant and important, and they all push architecture towards a non-political, non-critical, form of architectural practice. It is a way of thinking about architecture that subordinates it to capital and power rather than thinking about architecture as a way of challenging or intervening in the distribution of capital and power.

The traditional competition format, whether open or invitation-only, seem to give the architects greater room to be creative as architects than other formats. The process under this format shifts some of the power away from municipal planners and clients, giving architects more room to work more freely and to move their practice towards the arts.

Parallel assignment appears to offer less autonomy for architects than the open competition because of the more direct approach of host organisations, as seen in the Vippetangen and Medieval Park cases. Both of these cases did include broader publics in the process, but this was based on the processes outlined by their host, the municipal planning office. The parallel assignment B6A/B6B, hosted by HAV Eiendom AS, was largely dominated by commercial interests.

Competitions lead towards an architecture depoliticised by post-politics by inviting architects to emphasize their role as experts giving form to buildings and solving spatial problems, as they are defined in the competition briefs. Competitions are often said to be the best way to judge "architectural quality" (as defined by architects themselves, specifically the ones on the jury) (Chupin et al., 2015), and they are often described as a tool to identify the best possible solution to a problem (Cajide & Cobo, 2010; Katsakou, 2012). This reduction in problem solving may be the clearest expression of the post-political effect of the competition; it casts competitions as non-ideological and non-political tools for "doing what works". It is the spatialization of the current consensus on the "correct" distribution of the sensible.

## 5.2 Right to the city

The theoretical framework can be simplified for a moment, and the impact of the architectural competition on the right to the city can be considered. As discussed, the right to the city can be understood in different ways. If the right to the city is considered as a right to partake in its planning, design and the shaping of local communities, the architectural competition is not the answer. The cases presented here shows that architectural competitions and architects competing do little to extend this right to people outside the process. The democratic deficit of competitions have been commented on earlier (Bern, 2017; Bern & Røe, 2022). What this set of cases also shows is that the architectural competition is a varied and malleable process, something the work of White (2016), analysing public participation as part of a competition for a project in downtown Toronto, has also documented. Given this versatility, the context for the competition is important to how competitions actually take shape and function. The cases considered here are shaped by the Fjord City waterfront redevelopment policy and how the political leadership decided to organise the Fjord City project.

The competitions discussed were intended to deliver the kind of high-quality architecture and attractive urban spaces that dominate contemporary waterfront developments. But the architects' answers show that architects do engage themselves in broader goals than what is specified in competition briefs. While architects do try to create urban spaces that all people can use and enjoy, it still often seems that their primary concern is their vision, their design and the realization of their projects.

By accepting an invitation, submitting for prequalification or submitting in open competitions, architects accept most, if not all, of the limitations that the broader planning system imposes through the competition. The ideal of designing architecture that is for everyone is limited by the Fjord City waterfront development project. As with many waterfront projects the Fjord City is a neo-liberal development project where the municipality takes a leading role in creating economic growth (Peck & Tickell, 2002). The establishment of municipality-owned firms operating as if they were privately owned, together with public-private partnerships, is an example of how the state plays the capitalist game (Harvey, 1989). The actual, existing version of neo-liberalism observed in the Fjord City project is tempered by the traditionally strong welfare-state (Sager, 2014) but the project still runs contrary to the right of the city by prioritizing commercial spaces and high-end housing.

### 5.3. Dissensus

This article has argued that an architecture of dissensus, a political architecture, might be understood as one aimed towards equality and a more equitable distribution of the right to the city. This concerns both the right to shape and to experience the city. The aesthetic and the political dimensions of both the current distribution and any potential effort towards redistribution are closely related, as they are both questions of equality, the right to be included and the right to sensible experiences. In this article, this has been given a more concrete expression through the concept of the right to the city. Architectural competitions have been used as cases here because they arguably represent the moment when architects experience more autonomy in their practice (Lipstadt, 2009). The competition briefs and jury reports reveal that, in many ways, the competition functions according to the post-political consensus regarding how architecture-led waterfront developments should be approached. The priority is iconic or monumental architecture that creates attractive urban spaces in the service of commercial and financial growth (Hanssen & Saglie, 2010; Sklair, 2017).

The clearest effort to extend the program in a manner that challenges the dominant distribution of the right to the city is the public-access rooftop on the Munch Museum. While at best merely a "little victory" (Pugalis & Giddings, 2011), it is still a significant deviation from the standard practice in iconic architectural design and waterfront development (Sklair, 2017). As such, it does represent an architectural dissensus and a design element that is political because it extends the right to this urban space beyond the consumer to the citizen.

## 6 Conclusion

What most clearly separates architecture from other forms of art is that it always must have some end beyond itself. While other arts can be art

for the sake of art, architecture cannot exist without a purpose or some utility. Therefore, the idea of architecture as affective, pre-reflective and only about the immediate aesthetic experience, as Spencer (2016) and Lahiji (2014) argue are the dominate idea of architecture under contemporary capitalism, is clearly to one-dimensional. Iconicism (Dunham-Jones, 2014), solutionism (Murphy, 2012) and post-critical paradigm (Rendell, 2007) are concepts or paradigms that reproduce the same mistake. They view politics and aesthetics as disconnected – or go even further and see architectural aesthetics as liberated from politics (Dunham-Jones, 2014). But what can be learned from the analysis of the cases presented here and in the context of the Fjord City waterfront development is that it is much more productive to understand them as connected. That means understanding aesthetics as part of the basic distribution of positions and experiences in society, and that aesthetics plays a role in determining and maintaining this distribution. Architecture always changes the distribution of spaces and experiences to some degree, so in the practice of architecture there is really no choice to be made between aesthetics and politics. The actual choice is whether to challenge the existing distribution of the right to the city or to reinforce it. The autonomy and the particular space of action competitions give architects can, at least sometimes, be used to make architecture that challenges the neo-liberal logic that dominates waterfront redevelopments in particular and urban planning more generally. It might be limited to small victories but as long as there is still a hope that small victories can aggregate, accumulate or inspire, they should not be disregarded.

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Aleksander Bern holds a PhD in Human Geography from the University of Oslo. The article presented here is part of his PhD project The socio-spatial politics of architectural competitions in urban redevelopments: Competitions in The Fjord City, Oslo. It is a study of how architectural competitions are used, how their use has implications for urban governance and the politics of urban planning and development. Aleksander Bern is currently a researcher at the Eastern Norway Research Institute at the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences.

