

Saving The Wooden Town of Trondheim – A Study of an Urban Planning Discourse

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Nordic Journal of Architectural Research
Volume 19, No 4, 2006, 14 pages
Nordic Association for Architectural Research
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TOPIC: ARCHITECTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY – AGENTS OF CHANGE?

Abstract:

Saving The Wooden Town of Trondheim – A Study of an Urban Planning Discourse.

This article is based on the PhD thesis “The wooden town of Trondheim – A cultural heritage in decay” (Kittang 2006), and is focusing on the public debate on the urban development of Trondheim from 1965 to the present. The article tries to shed light on why the attitudes to renewal or preservation were subject to such a sharp debate and change in the town planning policy, and the ways in which these attitudes are expressed in today’s debate on urban planning and development. The study applies a social constructivist approach and a discourse perspective to the investigation of the formation of these attitudes and this shift in the appreciation of the wooden towns’ characteristics and qualities.

Key words:

cultural heritage, urban planning, planning theory, discourse analyses

Introduction

Due to economic circumstances and the easy availability of building materials, Norway has a unique collection of towns and cities that consist in part of buildings made from wood. These wooden districts constitute one of the country's most important contributions to the world's architectural heritage.

Frequent fires in towns and cities, resulting in the destruction of entire neighbourhoods or worse, led to the banning of wood as a construction material in large parts of Europe where there were densely built urban areas. More and more towns and cities introduced and enforced an ordinance stating that the outer walls had to be built in brick or stone. But in contrast to the reaction in many other countries, Norwegian authorities did not attempt to enforce the exclusive use of brick or stone in new buildings – probably because the economic conditions and the availability of building materials were not conducive to such a move (Larsen 1989). There was great resistance to the idea of changing existing building techniques in order to rebuild towns using other materials and craft skills, when the expertise was less readily available, and when prices were many times higher than the cost of building a corresponding log-timbered house (Roede 2001).

After major fires, the wooden town was more often than not reproduced more or less according to the old design it had before the fire. Despite strict building rules and regulations, many historical traits and qualities were therefore reproduced in the rebuilt town. Our oldest wooden towns and cities thus have roots in the building traditions and

urban development of the Middle Ages. In the Nordic countries, and especially in Norway, wood was used as the predominant building material in towns and built-up areas until the early 20th century. Even though wood was forbidden as a building material in our largest cities, before 1850, it was not introduced a general prohibition to build with wood in urban areas before after the great fire in Ålesund in 1904.

Norway therefore has a unique collection of wooden towns and cities. Wooden houses constitute an important part of the Norwegian cultural heritage, reflect a building tradition which is more than a thousand years old. The wooden architecture lends a distinctive character to built-up environments along the entire length of our country, adapting to variations in climate and conditions of use in different parts of the country. Wooden architecture also reflects developments in living conditions across the ages, as well as changes of style and fashion.

From the 1900s, municipal ordinances to build in brick or stone and the introduction of different architectural traditions led to a gradual decline in the wooden districts of Norwegian towns and cities. In many places, comprehensive and nationwide plans for the demolition of the historical wooden neighbourhoods were introduced as early as the interwar period. In 1938 professor Sverre Pedersen's plan for Midtbyen in Trondheim was approved by the city council. This plan implied that most of the wooden built up area should be demolished and replaced by high buildings in concrete and steel. The market trend and The second world war postponed the demolishing till the 1960's and 1970's.



Figure 1: The wooden architecture reflects a more than thousand years old building tradition. From Bergen, Trondheim and Røros. Photo: DK

The old buildings and districts in the centre of most Norwegian towns and cities were built from wood. Luckily, the demolition plans were too comprehensive and the economic conditions too difficult for their full realisation. Hence, the old wooden neighbourhoods survived into the 1960s, at which time the economic boom in combination with a strong desire for modernisation heavily increased political pressure to have the plans implemented (Stugu 1997; Guttu 2003).

This was also the situation in other Nordic countries. 85,5% of all dwellings in towns and villages in Finland was made of wood in 1970 (Helander 1974). The housing problem after the second world war resulted in a substantial demolishing of old wooden houses which were replaced with new buildings in steel and concrete, and in a modern, architectural style which was very different from the existing building tradition. Both in Sweden and Finland the wooden towns were characterized by a low exploitation ratio. Since the value of the sites in these central parts of the town were many times as high as the value of the old, rundown wooden buildings, this urban fabric represented a threat to the wooden town parts and contributed to the decline of the wooden towns during the 1970s. In Norway the wooden towns were much more density exploited, partly due to topographical circumstances. Additionally it could be much more difficult to carry through large scale redevelopment schemes in the hilly urban landscape along the coast of Norway than in Sweden and Finland. Norway succeeded in saving more of the wooden architecture than other Nordic countries (Kittang 2006).

The consequence of this modernisation project was a comprehensive demolition of old wooden neighbourhoods in central parts of our towns and cities, where a large proportion of the valuable wooden buildings were torn down. However, little by little this demolition policy started to meet with resistance, first from the cultural heritage protection authorities, and later also from broad groups of people who defended the old wooden neighbourhoods – on the grounds that they represented important building- and housing resources in the town and city centres, guaranteed the maintenance of social networks as well as the distinctive character and identity of the town or city, and represented a functional and visual diversity which newer residential areas were incapable of reproducing. The spread of the

preservation viewpoint created new and broadly based alliances in defence of the wooden town as an important social and cultural environment. Over time, these views gained ground, and a body for preserving these wooden towns and cities was established. The project “The wooden towns of the Nordic countries”, after an initiative from ICOMOS, the advisory body to UNESCO on matters related to world heritage, and the 1975 European Architecture Conservation Year established from the European Council, made also a changing view on the historical wooden towns (ICOMOS 1972; Kollandsrud 1977).

Emerging from a period during which they were characterised by comprehensive decay and threatened by radical plans for urban renewal, these wooden districts are now perceived as attractive residential and urban areas which are worth preserving as part of our cultural heritage – but also as “living” parts of town which must adapt to changes in socially determined parameters of development. This contradiction between the wish to preserve and the need for change has resulted in a sharp exchange of opinions in many of our historical wooden towns.

I have examined the conflict between preservation and renewal as an extension of conflicts between different disciplines and their priorities. The planning sector is made up of various academic and professional traditions within which different attitudes to and opinions about urban development have emerged over time. Development and changes within these approaches take place within and across a variety of discourses where the practices of different stakeholders in different positions influence opinion-making.

By examining public debate on the development of “the wooden town of Trondheim” during the 40-year period from the mid-1960s to the present, I have tried to shed light on why the attitudes to renewal or preservation of the wooden district were subject to such dramatic changes during the first part of this time span. I also examine current attitudes to these questions, and the ways in which these attitudes are expressed in today’s debate on urban planning and in actual urban development.

Studying the formation of attitudes

I have chosen to apply a social constructivist approach to the investigation of the formation of these attitudes and this shift in the appreciation of the the wooden towns’ char-

acteristics and qualities. The different views expressed in the urban planning debate in the 1970s reflected different attitudes to and expectations about the town – attitudes which were conditioned by different social and cultural circumstances, and by how the town was perceived and used by the different stakeholders. According to social constructivism, our attitudes are conditioned by our social context, and what we call reality or truth is formed and mediated by people in different social and cultural situations (Burr 1995). Perceptions of reality are formed through dialogue and social intercourse with other people in a specific cultural context. Our only option for understanding how and why individuals think and act the way they do, is therefore to study them in the social and cultural context in which they live and participate. The different structures of meaning we are surrounded by determine our understanding of how the world makes sense, and how we should behave. They will therefore be woven into social constructs of reality, and are conveyed and interpreted through the tools we have developed for this use – especially the language. These different structures of meaning – called “discourses” in social constructivist theory – shape our conceptions of the town or city. The different discourses construe the town / city in different ways, thus establishing different bases for evaluation and prioritisation (Jørgensen og Phillips 1999).

When different academic, professional and social groups present different opinions about urban planning and the development of towns and cities, they express the different discourses which influence us. Some of these discourses are more dominant in specific circles than in others, and through studying them, we can learn more about why different attitudes are expressed in different social contexts, and what factors contribute towards changes to points of view and ways of understanding the issues involved. These discourses contain structured convictions, rationalisations, and forms of logic and knowledge which everyone in society relates to when making decisions, putting forward arguments, and making priorities. The opinions and understandings held by the different actors are to a great extent determined by the discourse in which they take part. Discourses provide the framework for actions and behaviour, so that our actions, our social practices, are provided by the discourses we operate within or relate to. The given discourse supplies the participant with a repertoire to draw

on in opinion-making and communicating (Martinussen 2004). When we wonder why different people in different positions have such different perceptions of the town, it is important to see their views and the practices these views entail in the light of the discourse people operate within. By studying patterns in what has actually been said and written, we can see how various statements form a system of connected attitudes and understandings, and what social consequences follow from these discursive presentations; from this, we can obtain valuable information about why and how perceptions of the wooden town’s characteristics, qualities and intrinsic value have changed throughout the discourse.

The wooden town discourse was an arena where several other discourses tried to establish themselves, came into conflict and created considerable amounts of controversy. Some of these discourses were more dominant than others, and at certain times they seemed unquestionable, as hegemonic positions. The texts under study portray connections as if they were given, actual conditions, and beyond any kind of discussion. New arguments and new forms of knowledge were produced in order to support this understanding of reality, in an attempt to maintain its hegemony. Hence, knowledge was produced continuously through research, the drafting of policies and the forwarding of arguments whose primary purpose was upholding the hegemonic position of this discourse.

The necessity of modernising our old, run-down towns and cities by replacing the old buildings was a view which for several post-war decades remained virtually unchallenged in the public debate. The hegemonic perception was that the inappropriate and badly maintained wooden houses needed to be replaced by modern and more functional edifices which could meet the modern city’s demands in terms of infrastructure and building structures.

The debate about preserving the old, historical neighbourhoods came to represent a hegemonic intervention, with the result that commonly accepted connections and “truths” about urban development and the need to modernise the city were challenged by new views which emphasised the need to preserve the city’s historical lines and its cultural heritage, since these represent important values as both cultural and living environments. The current propensity to see the many advantages, in terms of both the econ-

omy and environment, of preserving and rehabilitating old houses, has come about because the hegemonic articulation of the old houses as unattractive, uneconomic and impractical had to give way to articulations of these buildings as conveyors of identity, and as inexpensive and useful. The hegemonic intervention was a process where the conflicts were played out in a discursive struggle through which new hegemonic frameworks of understanding were established. The dissolution of the hegemonic discourse took place through a deconstruction of the conceptions that the historical wooden buildings and neighbourhoods stood in the way of a necessary renewal of the city, and that the wooden city suffered from a lack of functional and environmental qualities. This deconstruction is central in the analysis of the wooden districts, and was the consequence of a broad public debate where different discourses tried to influence contemporary understandings and social practices.

Central politicians were forced to see what these old urban neighbourhoods represented in new ways, as both material resources and parts of the cultural heritage. New politicians entered the stage, took up central positions and implemented fresh and more preservation-oriented measures. The changes were radical and took place over a short period of time. The discourse surrounding the modernisation project in post-war urban development, was challenged by new understandings of urban development, developed within an alternative discourse which offered different conceptions of the city's social and cultural qualities, and of the town as a living environment.

The extent and ways in which individual participants were able to dominate the discourse reflects the positions of power that they occupied. The discourse thus provides a basis for the execution of power. French philosopher and sociologist Michel Foucault emphasised that this execution of power was not only a question of institutional power, but that, just as importantly, it was a matter of being able to influence language, concepts and symbols, and not least the ability to create a political agenda (Foucault 1980; Thomassen 1997). In Foucault's theories, power is closely linked to the concept of discourse, through his emphasis on how power is established through discourses, and on how discourses contribute towards maintaining or changing the distribution of power. By studying the discursive processes – how discourses are constructed, and how they produce

images of reality – we can also gain insight into the constellations of power which produce social reality.

By using civil disobedience like occupying old, wooden houses and start refurbishing, organizing demonstrations and petitions, the planning debate was moved out from the city hall and in to the public room. By putting forward arguments that supported the need for safeguarding the old wooden houses, because they represented important housing resources and were important presumptions for the diversity of urban life, deprived citizens and radical students were challenging the hegemonic position of the discourse dominated by engineers, economists and leading politicians in the town.

Theories of urban planning

French sociologist Henri Lefebvre considered urban development a basic part of the fundamental processes of capitalist economy. Urban development sought to adapt the urban environment to developments within the relationships of production and consumption in society. This often conflicted with the town or city as a cultural and social environment. In Lefebvre's view, the modern, capitalist city is dominated by market forces, and its orientation is towards money, trade and exchange value, irrespective of the needs of social groups. Lefebvre believed that this development could also be read in modern urban architecture (Pløger 1997) (Lefebvre 1974 / 1991.).

The same conflict is evident in the theories of French historian Françoise Choay which identify three different theoretical approaches in 19th century town planning (Choay 1969). The first of these approaches, the *regularist approach*, sought to transform the existing city in order to make it better adapted to society's needs and demands. This approach was concerned with creating order, tidying up the narrow network of streets, and renewing houses. Within the regularist approach laws were created and a planning administration was developed in order to enable this urban transformation to be carried out.

The *progressist approach* built on visions of social improvement and a wish to exploit the innovations offered by science and technology, based among other factors on new systems of communication and an alternative structuring of space. Utopian models were drawn up, with an emphasis on creating good residential areas which had an abundance of

light, air and green areas; and with a standardisation based on the principle of equality and on new industrial and technological preconditions.

The *culturalist approach* saw the city first and foremost as a cultural and social environment. Solutions were often to be found in the pre-industrial town, in the small-scale, and in widespread variation. Unlike the progressist approach, the culturalist one was not based on visionary conceptions; it developed as a critique of the situation in existing towns/cities at the onset of industrialisation. Behind its nostalgic notions lay the Romantic Period's fondness for historical study and its conceptions of the idyllic, pre-industrial town. Emergent ideas about preservation also formed an important basis for this approach and its need to idealise life in the pre-industrial towns.

It is difficult to regard these three approaches as separate and competing ones; rather, it seems that professional planners absorbed all of these approaches in their work, but in different ways at different times. Choay viewed the development of the urban planning discipline as a process which was influenced by a range of societal conditions, as well as by contemporary philosophy and science.

Swedish architectural historian Björn Linn identified the same three general approaches in 20th century planning activities (Linn 1974). Based on Françoise Choay's categories, he applies the following concepts and categorisations in his work: The *regularist* approach contributed towards the creation of the public planning system, in the shape of the development of laws and regulations and of a bureaucracy related to planning at the beginning of the 20th century. The wish to provide infrastructure and space for new developments, and generally to enable the town/city to meet the new demands of society, were enacted in line with this type of thinking. The *Rationalists* had their break-through in the 1930s under the name of "functionalism", winning over the planning profession with their visions and their optimistic belief in progress. The *humanist* approach was evident in the strongly radical movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, which included the urban environment group, among others. This approach found its spokesmen mainly among the generation of young radicals, but it was also represented in circles with more conservative cultural values.

I have based my analysis of the development of the wood-

en district of Trondheim on the three approaches described above, which I have chosen to call the *regularist*, the *rationalist* and the *culturalist* approach, respectively. The regularist approach seeks to regulate and further develop the already existing urban environment. This is the approach taken by the public administration. The rationalist approach aims for a new and more efficient and functional urban fabric built on the problem-solving approaches found in industry and modern production technology. The culturalist approach sees the city first and foremost as a living environment, and takes an interest in how the urban environment is perceived in psychological and social terms by its inhabitants. This approach has its basis in the humanities, as well as in the debate surrounding art and culture, but it should also be perceived as a reaction to the attempts of industrial and post-industrial society to adapt urban development to modern conditions of production and consumption.

The urban planning discourse around the wooden town of Trondheim

In this article I apply a discourse perspective in studying the development of "The Wooden Town of Trondheim". Several different discourses comprise the discourse order which constitutes the urban planning discourse as a whole. The different discourses are characterised by the fact that they construe the city in different ways, thus creating a basis whereby different representations of the city emerge over time. In these different representations it is possible to recognise the approaches to urban planning described above: the regularist, the rationalist, and the culturalist directions. The struggle between these different understandings has caused a great deal of controversy during the time-period covered in my study of the urban planning debate in Trondheim.

The relative strength of the different approaches has changed over time. The regularist approach to urban planning has been dominant within the planning profession and in the public debate during certain periods. At other times, rationalist approaches have been more prominent, only to be challenged in their turn by culturalist approaches. The dominant approach in the public debate at any given time has depended on the dynamics of the urban planning discourse. This phenomenon also corresponds to French philosopher Paul Ricouer's views, according to which the spatial organisation of the urban fabric is a cultural representation which changes in line with the his-

torically dominant discourses (Pløger 1997).

The primary source materials for this study are newspaper reports as well as documents relating to urban planning from a forty-year period between 1965 and 2005. The most important of these materials are reports, feature articles, and letters to the editor from the *Adresseavisen* newspaper. In addition, information contained in city council documents from this period have been useful, as have monographs and articles on the topic. Taken together, the materials contain texts which reflect different discourses – discourses which have been analysed with the purpose of finding answers to the following questions:

- Which representations of the city occur in the discourse?
- What are the discourse’s dominant understandings, and in what ways have these changed?
- What have been the discursive and social consequences of the different understandings?

A decade dedicated to demolition

This part of the history of the wooden district in Trondheim is set mainly in the 1960s. There was widespread consensus during this period that the old wooden quarters of the city needed to be renewed – and that the old wooden houses should be replaced by modern buildings that both economically and in terms of functionality were better suited to the demands made by modern society of a city’s material structures. This modernisation project reflected a hegemonic understanding of the city as an economic arena adapted to a modern, capitalist economy. As an important measure, Trondheim drew up a municipal masterplan for the city’s development and management of land use, presented as a first draft in 1965, which prepared the ground for the demolition of the historical city centre of Trondheim (Andersson & Skjånes AS 1965)

After over a century of negligent maintenance in combination with widespread renewal brought about by the requirement to build in brick or stone, the old wooden houses were in poor condition, and came under threat from radical urban renewal plans. A large proportion of the old wooden buildings in the city centre was lost during the 1960s. Many impressive wooden mansions from the 1800s were demolished to make room for new office buildings and department stores. In addition, many were destroyed by fire, due to a lack

of preventative measures. The dominant attitude towards the old wooden architecture was clearly expressed in the invitations to take part in an architectural competition arranged in 1960 to redesign Munkegata Street and the City Square – a competition which mobilised the nation’s most prominent urban planners. According to the invitations, “*One must assume that the rest of the old two-storey buildings will disappear...*” (Norske arkitektkonkurranser 74 1962).

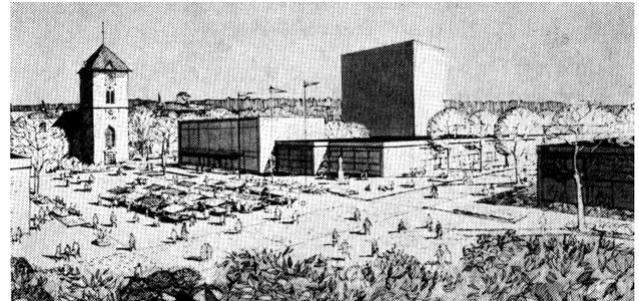


Figure 2: Proposal for developing Trondheim Torg. (Architects: Erik Langdalen and Nic. Stabell) Source: Norske arkitektkonkurranser74/1962

The visions of the modern city were based on the conception that the old city should be replaced by a new and modern one which was built according to a new urban structure, where the traditional blocks would be erased and modern transport technology would be introduced. The architectural expression was strict and rational, articulating the city’s adaptation to a new economic and technological reality. In the course of the 1960s, the elegant wooden quarters in the commercial city centre were transformed into a fragmented and incoherent urban environment, and the stately wooden mansions with their ground-floor shops were surrounded by modern business premises which stood in stark contrast to the wooden buildings’ dimensions, scale and use of building materials.

These attitudes were not challenged until 1970 when the wooden mansions along two sides of the central square – the *Svaneapoteket* and *Hornemann mansions* – were due up for demolition. The struggle to save the *Svaneapoteket* mansion represented a turning point for this brand of urban planning. The proposal to tear down the two wooden mansions by the central square was accompanied by arguments which emphasised the need for renewing the city centre: “*We must expect the renewal of the city centre (Midtbyen) which has now started, to gain ground to an increasing extent ... plans must be made for*

the future ... and one must not take too limited a stance on these matters ... The old city centre must also have the right to a functional renewal." (City manager Lars Folstad in (Bystyresak 1969/298) This statement from the technical department of the municipal administration was strongly influenced by the regularist approach to urban planning, according to which old building structures have to give way to the modern city's need for new urban- and building structures.



Figure 3: Demonstrations for saving Svaneapoteket. Source: Adresseavisen
The listed building Svaneapoteket to day. Photo: DK

This mindset met with resistance from several directions. Many people thought it important that the city should not only be a well-functioning centre for trade, but that

it should also cater to cultural and social values. The argument was raised that the city ought to preserve its historical sources, not only because they represented important values in terms of our cultural heritage, but also because they gave the city its distinct identity: *"Contemporary man has discovered that chasing status symbols is not sufficient. He demands more – an environment conducive to his well-being... don't allow (Trondheim) to turn into a city devoid of character, because Trondheim is a city with traditions and a good environment"* (Martin Michaelsen, conservative politician and restauranteur in (Adresseavisen 1970.II.30).

These two statements expressed very different conceptions of the city. While the first articulated a wish for an adaptation and reorientation of the city in the light of modern conditions of production, the second represents a wish to conserve the city's traditional values. Even though the debate surrounding Trondheim's municipal masterplan of a few years previous had heralded the controversies which were to arise between regularist, rationalist and culturalist planning ideals, this was the first major confrontation. In the years to follow, the urban planning debate in Trondheim was to be a heated one, with considerable differences of opinion with regards to the development of the city.

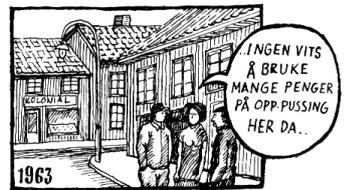
The struggle over the city as a living environment

The 1970s were characterised by confrontations between urban environment activists and the political and administrative management of the municipality. Many of the campaigns took place simultaneously during the period from the early 1970s through to the late 1990s, and were to influence each other in terms of choices of strategy and campaign methods. Many of the residential areas near the city centre were both physically and socially run-down. Poorly maintained houses in combination with increasing traffic-related environmental problems meant that the most resourceful residents moved out, leaving the central residential areas to less resourceful groups who had little influence in the struggle against municipal demolition plans. Help often came from external sources. The Director General for Cultural Heritage waged a long-lasting battle to open the eyes of the municipal decision-makers to the value of the cultural heritage they presided over. But various motives for preserving these old residential areas in the central parts of the city also contributed towards a broadly based mobilisa-

tion of very different groups in favour of defending the old wooden quarters.



"This is where the motorway will go."



"No use in spending money on maintaining these houses"



"This area is badly maintained. The motorway can be built here"

Figure 4: The decline of the wooden houses was often based on the municipality's resolution. Bakklandet ca. 1975. Photo: Kjetil Arntzen. Illustration: Arvid Sveen. Source: Kontrast 40/1973

In addition to the antiquarian discipline's obvious interests, many students had moved into these residential areas on a temporary basis. They offered active resistance to municipal demolition plans, often resorting to measures which did not always mobilise those who otherwise shared their views

on preservation to quite the same extent. The use of civil disobedience often made it difficult for many to lend their support to these campaigns. This lack of active support from the more cautious group made it easier for the municipality to meet the campaigners with ignorance and arrogance. On the other hand, these "rogue" campaigns brought the debate about the future of these wooden quarters out of the closed academic and political fora, and into a public sphere where people other than planners and politicians could take part, thus adding views which were influenced by other discourses to the discussions.

According to these views, the dense residential areas close to the city centre were attractive and versatile residential environments and represented important housing resources at a time of housing shortage. Surveys carried out into living conditions uncovered valuable information about the areas' residential qualities and rendered the social and material resources represented by these old housing environments more clearly visible. The residents often emphasised the advantages associated with living close to the city centre, the versatile functions of the environment, and not least the quality of the social network – which appeared to be a lot stronger in these old areas than in the modern and alienating suburbs. The surveys revealed previously unknown information about how residents in these areas conceived of the quality of life there, and managed to shift the focus to the city as a living environment. Thus, important social and cultural qualities associated with the wooden town were brought to light.

Even though the struggle over the *Bakklandet*, *Ilsvikora* and *Svartlamoen* areas differed in many respects from the struggle over the *Svaneapoteket* and *Hornemann mansions*, there were still many similarities. The old wooden milieus were in the way of a necessary renewal of the urban fabric. The municipal authorities therefore needed to create an image of the old buildings as impractical, expensive to maintain, and – not least – a fire hazard: "The rehabilitation of old houses is enormously costly... The immediate point seems to be that this will be so expensive that there will be little return on the investment... One needs to keep in mind that many of these wooden buildings are extremely dangerous fire traps" (Leader of the city's redevelopment council Ragnar Forbregd in (Adresseavisen 1975.09.13).

The analyses conducted by the residents and by academics from the university in the shape of cost estimates for reha-



Figure 5: Demonstrations, petitions and charity concerts were important articulations in the culturalistic discourse. Source: Adresseavisen

bilitation, living-condition surveys, and the preparation of alternative development plans, were important articulations which as counter-expertise also served to create different understandings. The urban environment campaigns contributed towards an expansion of the culturalist discourse, by making it understood that the wooden quarters not only represented valuable housing resources and a cultural heritage, but also that they reflected the importance of the city as both a social and a cultural environment to live in.

Urban transformations and preservation of the urban landscape

The work on the municipal masterplan and the struggle over the wooden mansions by the central square (*Torget*) uncovered a need for a new and comprehensive local plan for *Midtbyen*, the city centre. At the start of this planning work, between fifty and sixty different regulation plans for this area were in existence. What they all had in common was that they contained building lines and building heights which meant that most of the existing wooden buildings did not comply with the existing local plans, and according to the plans, they were to be replaced (Adresseavisen 1977.12.01). Many of these older local plans were characterised by an optimistic belief in development expressed as broad streets, tall buildings, and a complete demolition of historical neighbourhoods where the houses were made from wood. They also created notions of potential devel-

opment and property value which were not conducive to the preservation of the old wooden milieus. The common belief was that providing regulatory legalisation for the existing buildings would stimulate the maintenance and development of the existing urban structure and its buildings. However, the intentions and the actual realities resulting from this planning work would turn out to be poles apart.

Important premises for the planning work were agreed upon; however, following up these premises was to prove difficult. An important document was the report from the Conservation Committee (Antikvarisk utvalg) *The Image of Trondheim* (Trondheims bybilde) (Fasting 1976). This report included a registration of all valuable buildings in the town, but contributed also in extending the basis for conservation to include more than cultural heritage, but also cultural environments which constitute the character of the town. The urban fabric consisting of Cicignon's city plan from 1682 and the remnants from the medieval street pattern, the proportions of the wooden town with its rhythm and scale, were very important ingredients in making *Midtbyen* to "one of the finest city centres in the Nordic countries". (Skaslien 1981)

The degree of utilisation of the city centre (*Midtbyen*), was to be kept on the same level, and the area used for residential purposes was to be increased. In addition, both restrictions imposed on changing the purpose for which building were used and the return of buildings to residen-

tial purposes were important aims of the plan. *Midtbyen*, the heart of the city, was to be restored as a living environment (Trondheim kommune 1975).

The planning work also aimed to preserve the cityscape. The focus moved away from the isolated items of cultural heritage towards the historical wooden neighbourhoods constituting the cityscape. Over a short space of time, culturalist approaches to planning had experienced a breakthrough among both the political and the administrative management of the municipality. The plan for the city centre (*Midtbyen*) appeared in many ways as a culturalist programme by emphasising the city as a social and cultural environment where the historical buildings contributed towards the city's distinctive character.



heim kommune 1981). A string of development projects uncovered strong tensions between the wish to preserve the city's distinctive character and the need to renew the city along rationalist approaches to urban development. The municipal management experienced frequent conflicts with the Director General for Cultural Heritage, as exemplified by the following statement: “*The Director General for Cultural Heritage must now come down to earth and see what we have the actual possibility of preserving in Trondheim. Realism needs to be brought into the picture.*” (Mayor Anne-Kathrine Parow in (Adresseavisen 1983, II.12)

Even before the plan for the *Midtbyen* city centre was approved, several of its central points were challenged. Despite the culturalist formulations of the plan, the buildings



Figure 6: Many reconstruction projects represents breaks with the city structure and building pattern. The new Remagården replaced the listed, but fire damaged building Little Harmonien after a long debate. Photo: DK (left) and unknown photographer (right) Source: Billedsamlingen UBIT.

However, these ideas on planning did not enjoy a hegemonic position among the municipal administrators, and even less so among the city's business community. This was expressed in the social practice of the discourse through the initiation of actual development projects. Even though the intentions of the plan for the city centre (the *Midtbyen* plan) was articulated as “*Securing a gradual renewal of the buildings, preserving and building on the distinctive character of the Midtbyen city centre as an environment in its own right. It is particularly important to preserve Trondheim's character as consisting of wooden buildings – as a wooden town*”, these aims were to be challenged in a range of cases in *Midtbyen's* commercial centre (Trondheim kommune 1979; Trond-

made from wood were still to disappear gradually from the commercial city centre in the years to come. A lack of fire safety precautions led to many fires, and the many reconstruction projects were to represent breaks with the city's structure and building pattern. New building projects were based on an international style which was far removed from the wooden city of Trondheim's panelled architecture, and whose volume and scale went beyond the framework of the existing wooden city.

What will be the future of Trondheim's wooden town?

After the great fire that took place in Trondheim city centre (*Midtbyen*) on 7th December 2002, consuming some of

the largest and most important wooden mansions, the future of the city's wooden buildings was back on the agenda. The new debate seemed to be characterised by controversy between culturalist and rationalist approaches, with the culturalist pronouncements favouring low-rise and small-scale buildings, which by and large would preserve the city's architectural traditions and thus strengthen the association between the city centre's character and its wooden structures: *"Many people want to rebuild in a way which takes better care of the old buildings' soul" – small-scale buildings made from wood, which constitute the city's distinctive character.*" (Trondheim kommune 2004.02.06)



papers depicted people as largely satisfied with the result: *"Trondheim was in mourning when fire struck in Nordre street three years ago. Many people feared that the cityscape would be ruined by the new building which was to replace the one lost. However, today most people are content. As the building has taken shape along Nordre street, the criticism has decreased dramatically".* (Ukeadressa 2005.12.10).

Throughout this project, an important clash between rationalist and culturalist representations appears to have been deconstructed. The desire to maintain the character of the wooden district in terms of building volume, height



Figure 7. Left: The burnt down mansion houses as they stood some time between 1908 -1910. Photo: Erik Olsen. Source: Bildesamlingen UBIT. Right: Nordre gate after the great fire in 2002. Photo: Karl Erik Refsnes, Bildesamlingen UBIT.

This wish to preserve the character of the wooden city by integrating the new project into the wooden city's grammar, naturally clashed with what can be described as rationalist articulations that this attractive city centre site had to be utilised in the best possible way in order to satisfy the property owners' economic expectations about the building project. An architectural competition for the site resulted in four relatively similar modernist solutions for how the block could be developed, and *"... the overall idea behind the four suggestions for the site of the fire was to give the owners what they wanted".* (Adresseavisen 2003.06.05)

Despite resistance from both politicians and the general public the winning project was implemented. When the construction work was completed, the news-

and scale had to give way to the property owners' wish to construct a large-volume building in ways that combined rational and cost efficient construction technology with building design. Through the dissolution of this controversy, a new dominant understanding of the premises for developing the wooden city was established. The new building complex on the site of the fire opened up the possibility of building in a freer design without concern for the context: *"Trondheim has been given a building which is allowed to stand out ... the city needs more of those."* Furthermore, the building is *"richly articulated, ... it is striking and pronounced, ... and has its own distinctive character."* (Ukeadressa 2005.12.10).

Today it appears as if the focus of the urban planning debate has moved away from the culturalist representa-



Figure 8: The new building which was constructed on the burn-out ruins. Photo: DK.

tions which have traditionally had a strong standing in the debate about the wooden district's future, towards regularist and rationalist representations which emphasize substantial economic growth achieved through an articulated architecture together with efficient use of space and rational building design. A shift in the urban planning discourse can be registered, with increasing support for context-independent architectural expressions. Such articulations will have the capacity to intensify a development of the *Midtbyen* city centre which departs from an urban environment where historical continuity and social and cultural values are prioritised.

Any system of knowledge will have to produce new forms of knowledge and new arguments in order to maintain its position in a dynamic discourse. Today's debate on the future of the wooden town is again challenging the relations of strength in the discourse. The changes being made to the physical structures of many towns and cities today are primarily happening as part of a project-based urban development driven by market-based economic forces. These projects are developed in the encounter between the private property developer and municipal urban planning, between rationalist and regularist ideas of urban development. The emphasis is on each individual building in each individual plot, without regard for the totality of the urban development. The role of architecture is to profile the project and the owner, by way of making the building conspicuous and attractive. The emphasis is on new and visionary building concepts, on an urban development adapted to new patterns of production and consumption, and on a concept of city life that is based on new values. There is no room in this type of urban planning for the discreet, contextual

architecture which was capable of being subordinated to the totality of the urban environment – an architecture which does not emphasise self-display, and which treads carefully in case it might damage the vulnerable historical character of the city.

Contextual architectural expressions are categorised as geared towards reconstruction, copying previous styles and even as pastiche architecture, and are currently regarded as artificial and un-authentic. It is accused of amounting to historical falsification, of denying historical reality, and showing contempt for the urge to innovate which is inherent in the idea of historical progress. Within the fields of both architecture and cultural heritage an important premise has been that each age should have its own architecture. Modern architectural expressions are given responsibility for conveying the city's development and at the same time making visible the distinctive features of different eras. While retaining the old city's character, the expression of the modern style also needs to be developed.

This leads to a paradox in the urban environment preservation movement. Since any new development in the historical city will replace old buildings, this understanding will lead to the gradual disappearance of the historical wooden district. By replacing the old wooden buildings with new ones displaying an independent architectural expression, the wooden environment in the city will disappear, in terms of both the choice of materials and the visual structure.

Today's tendency towards a strengthening of the rationalist and regularist representations in the discourse on urban planning leads to a corresponding weakening of culturalist understandings. Greater emphasis is put on contrast rather than adaptation, on breaking with the past rather than pursuing continuity, on what is modern rather than traditional, on simplicity rather than diversity. The attitudes and understandings which gain prominence in the urban planning discourse in the time to come, will be decisive for the development of the wooden district of the city of Trondheim.

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