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# NORDISK ARKITEKTURFORSKNING

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# The Wooden City of Stavanger

## Self image as a basis for development

LeRoy Olaf Tønning

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### **Abstract:**

Stavanger, located as Norway's fourth largest city on the south west coast, has developed swiftly from a rather marginal and poor town to be a dynamic and affluent centre for the off shore oil industry.

A transition of this type can easily cause a community to lose its balance in managing the rapid changes that involuntarily will take place, losing its identity in the process.

Several factors have put their mark on the historic development of the city, mainly the contact with the sea and the use of wood as a main building material.

The questions raised are how to analyze and value the genius loci of the city in order to take the necessary moves to preserve it, and how safeguarding can be done.

Stavanger was designated to be a European Cultural Capital in 2008, and in presenting the programme, cultural heritage and development, innovation and quality, environment, aesthetics and architecture were chosen as important aspects. A scheme for development of wooden building culture, called 'Norwegian Wood' was one of the main projects.

The venture has confirmed and strengthened the impression that there is a mutual acceptance of the fact that wood as a material represents definite qualities to be preserved and developed, representing a common basis for future urban development. Nevertheless, there is a deficient in dealing with principled decisions and co-ordinated action to ensure future development to be implemented in the right direction.

### **Keywords:**

Material quality, Urban identity, Wooden city, Norwegian Wood, Urban development, Preservation

This article will question how a perceived self-image of a city can constitute a fruitful basis for the physical urban development, with a special emphasis on the development of Stavanger as a 'wooden city'.

The matters to be discussed are:

- What are the characteristics of the genius loci of the city of Stavanger?
- Is there a mutual understanding of the material qualities to be preserved?
- If so; is there a common acceptance of what these qualities are consisted of, and a willingness to make the necessary sacrifices to be able to preserve and develop these qualities?

The article is based on a research project called "Trehusbyen Stavanger – Quo vadis?", using a series of in-depth interviews with local politicians, investors, shop owners, business leaders, historians, architects, planners, contractors and city centre homeowners.<sup>1</sup>

### **Background**

Stavanger, with more than 8000 wooden houses built before 1950 - often referred to as the City of Wooden Houses, has had a special historic development, giving a unique urban environment. The city is proudly proclaimed today to be the largest city of wooden houses in Europe, a natural development due to local social conditions and building traditions. Strong expansion in recent years has however in reality challenged the desired image.

Stavanger has had strong economic progress in recent years, from being a poor city<sup>2</sup> to being a dynamic industrial region as the "oil capital" of Norway, giving strong finances and growth. The Stavanger area has had a marked population growth in recent years, and a projected 37% increase from 217 000 inhabitants in 2009 to 298 000 in 2030.<sup>3</sup> The municipality of Stavanger has in addition a very limited land area for growth, especially considering the determination to preserve existing agricultural areas. The average population density within the city limits is 2670 persons/km<sup>2</sup> - somewhat less than in Oslo, but higher than both Bergen and Trondheim.<sup>4</sup>

### **Historic factors**

Local social circumstances and rural building traditions have been important factors in supporting basic mind-sets, influencing the development of Stavanger. The infrastructure of the city, the style and the detailing of the individual buildings are a reflection of daily life of times past that can be read as a historic document. The characteristics of the city are influenced by the interaction it has had with the surrounding region. The unassuming atmosphere in the oldest parts of the city is mainly a mark of the average restricted economic conditions of the time, but can also relate to the temperament that was prevalent among people in the region. The well-known statement: "I'm from Stavanger, does it matter?" might describe the self-image. Although there were differences, the farming community of the area has been quite egalitarian, and their buildings have been relatively homogenous, as variations were mostly in size. Towards the last part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, most farmers had become freeholders after having been tenant farmers<sup>5</sup>. The houses in the city, although often more sophisticated than rural buildings, were of the same type as found in the countryside, only more concentrated. The writer, Alexander Kielland wrote in one of his books about the buildings in Stavanger: "...[It is] a petty, messy and inflammable building development, where only the church is monumental."<sup>6</sup> It was noticeable that there were few public buildings in the town.<sup>7</sup> There were few manors, but most houses were of the same type as in the countryside, sometimes first erected locally and then moved to the city.

More families owned their own house than in other cities of Norway. That explains why the local decision-makers fought against the new law of obligation to build in brick or stone that the central authorities wanted to enforce after a series of extensive fires in 1904.<sup>8</sup> Stavanger had its share of urban fires – the last one was at Holmen, the northern part of the central city in 1860 that had razed about 250 buildings and caused a serious housing crisis. The small wooden houses were considered to be an important element in the development of the city. The executive committee of

the city council observed that there was a great need in Stavanger for small houses, stating: "...merchants, craftsmen, commissioners and office workers live largely in such small owner-occupied houses, side by side with working men almost everywhere." The wooden houses were considered to be important for "...capital accumulation for the ordinary inhabitants and also for social development."<sup>9</sup>

### **Interaction between the city and the countryside**

Stavanger is a coastal city, facing the sea and the rural district in the Ryfylke fjord. This was especially the dominating situation up to the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The fabric of the city is influenced by the contact with the fjord. The most important activities, in trade and industry as well as socially, were influenced by this contact. The waterfront warehouses were a result of this orientation, and they created a long façade towards the sea, defining the face of the city towards the outside world. They had a characteristic design with the gables facing the sea and a protruding part of the roof at the ridge to cover a large winch. The structure had its origin in the 1700's with the exterior walls consisting of columns and beams – a system that can be found all over Europe. The Stavanger warehouses differ however in using bowed "knees" of natural growth that were used to give rigid joints – a structure that seems to be derived from boat building.

The warehouses were threatened to be demolished during the 60's and 70's to give way for traffic veins, due to a lack of understanding of the historic value of the structures, and many of the 240 buildings have been replaced. The last building of this type on the urban waterfront was demolished as late as in 1982.<sup>10</sup> The same buildings are now called "Stavanger's stave churches", and have been given a high conservation standing, even though the direct contact with the sea has been lost. They have new uses, and represent a considerable contribution to the urban environment and history of the city. The reversal has been total. Recent infill projects, e.g. Skagen Brygge Hotel and "Blaa Magasin", have been monitored very closely by the planning department to ensure that the scale, use of ground floor areas, the facades and use of materials have complied with the existing environment.

Most of the oldest wooden houses in Stavanger are small residential buildings of solid wood. Stavanger's contact as a small town<sup>11</sup> with strong roots towards the Ryfylke fjord, has historically been influenced both by the building traditions, methods and use of materials used in the surrounding areas. There were a few independent people that were internationally influenced, looking to Europe for inspiration, but most houses were a part of the local popular culture.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, it can be perceived that local rural building traditions and techniques have historically constituted the basis for the atmosphere that distinguishes Stavanger as a city today.

### **Local rural building traditions influencing the architecture of Stavanger**

In pre-industrial times, the farmer would preferably use as many available materials as possible from the farm to minimize the need to acquire costly materials elsewhere, and he would also do most of the work himself. Resources were limited, and general knowledge of how to select and process materials was quite well developed in the rural society. A building project was time consuming, and a sequence of important decisions had to be made to get the most out of the investments. The erection of a new building was a social event, involving the whole family and neighbours, and the design of buildings gives insight into the social structure of the community. Traditional materials and skills / techniques, rooted in past local or regional building activity must be regarded as an important part of our cultural heritage.<sup>13</sup>

Knowledge about use and the treatment of wood was a general asset in the community, giving a common understanding of building design and methods. In a demanding climate, correct detailing was imperative, and the knowledge was shared locally. The employment of craftsmen - often a journeyman, was needed in addition to own efforts and voluntary work to ensure the desired quality. The journeymen often had room and board with the owner of the house during construction, accommodating social contact. Knowledge of building techniques and traditions were consequently passed around, even though geographical communication otherwise was quite limited.



New technology made it possible to reduce wastage and increase the efficiency of the building process, creating needed employment by encouraging sales of materials abroad. At the same time, as the supply of easy available timber was gradually reduced while the demand for housing grew, both in number and size, and it became necessary to save wood.<sup>14</sup>

“Recycling” of buildings was quite normal. Nothing that could be reused was discarded. Parts of buildings or even whole buildings were considered to be “movable/personal property” and could be moved several times on the same farm or even moved further away to another farm or a more urban setting when the family moved.<sup>15</sup> When people moved to the city, the house itself could be a prefabricated part of the moving load, taken by the owner from home on the farm and erected in the city as a “standard” house. Houses could also be dismantled and re-erected when a division of inheritance took place. Consequently, many of the houses in the city were transported from the surrounding countryside as an intentional form of prefabrication, and there were farms that produced notched log structures as an extra income.<sup>16</sup>

The system of guilds was dissolved in much of Europe after the French revolution.<sup>17</sup> From this time up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Norwegian cities did not seem to have a noticeable working class of construction workers.<sup>18</sup> Builders of wooden structures had a low status and were brought in from the surrounding regions as unorganised low-cost, hard working labour.<sup>19</sup> The trade was seasonal labour, and was most often an additional job for farmers and others, in effect a regional employment measure.

Training for the trade was done on the job by working together with accomplished craftsmen. The low cost of labour in relation to the cost of materials was an incentive to maintain labour intensive methods. The owner of the building project was strongly involved, and was most often constrained by traditions and the need to use local and often self-produced materials. Consequently, the design of buildings in a community was quite consistent, normally using a common grammar in form, structure and detailing with small variations in design. Subsequently the urban spaces of the built environment were harmonious and historically and socially bonded as a local building style. This is true of Stavanger as well.

Edward Relph has dealt with the question of the social relationship to the location.<sup>20</sup> Referring to Ian Nairn, he ascertains “...everyone is born with a need for identification with his surroundings and a relationship to them .. it is something we cannot afford to do without.” A place has a form of individuality – a defined character, constituted by the physical appearance, the activities taking place and the meanings embodied in the situation. These aspects constitute what is often termed the “spirit of the place” (genius loci)<sup>21</sup>. Chr. Norberg-Schulz points out that there is meaning in understanding the phenomenology of how things are put together. He writes<sup>22</sup>: “For life to take place, the place must be understood and respected.” Relph distinguishes between an “inside” and an “outside” experience of a place. The inside experience is based on belonging to and identifying with the place. “The more profoundly inside you are, the stronger is this identity with it.”<sup>23</sup> Norberg-Schulz uses the same phrases, saying: “to be inside ...is to be somewhere, away from what is outside.”<sup>24</sup> This has to do with involvement. The traditional relationship with the self-owned and often self-maintained wooden houses gave a strong feeling of understanding how things were put together and being an integrated part of the urban life.

### **The wallscape**

The word “façade” is derived from “face”, and the wall of an urban space is no doubt the most important element in defining the character and atmosphere of the place.<sup>25</sup>

Materials and surface treatments on buildings are perhaps the first impressions that meet the eye. Norberg-Schulz writes about traditional use of materials as an element of character of place.<sup>26</sup> Man-made structures are traditionally not isolated from the natural basis for development of life. Available and affordable materials were used in a manner that was useful in fulfilling the practical and more indefinable emotional needs of the inhabitants.

In addition to protecting the building, panelling is the visual presentation of the exterior towards the outside world, creating the walls of the public urban space. In a coastal climate, weather exposed surfaces had to be protected from decay, and exterior panelling as a "raincoat" was a technical as well as a visually appealing solution.

The earliest panelling was untreated, giving a rather drab and drear expression towards the public sphere, but the different types of panelling are a documentation of the reflective understanding of the characteristics of wood and how it should be used.<sup>27</sup>

Although there are basically only two methods of installing wood cladding – horizontally and vertically, panelling has been given many different expressions. In western Norway horizontal boarding has been the tradition, most likely due to the mild, moist coastal climate. Some say it was done to be able to replace the bottom panels as they deteriorated.<sup>28</sup> Others say it was the design of buildings with an external gallery that encouraged the use of horizontal panelling.<sup>29</sup>

Most buildings in Norway have vertical panelling. Dependant on economic basis and prevailing style, the panel can be given different profiles, surface treatment and composition, giving the façade distinct qualities – quite often trying to imitate the use of stone in classic architecture found in other countries.

Wooden facades have traditionally been used on many different types of buildings in addition to residential houses: waterfront warehouses, industrial buildings, and also on more important buildings - churches, city halls and manors. Frederick Wulz launches three ideal categories of walls.<sup>30</sup> The façade, he says, is a confrontation between the exterior and the interior rooms; a confrontation that creates clarity and precision, but also releases differences. These encounters take place in the facade that as ideas can be perceived and understood in different ways. The design, detailing and colour can give the buildings widely different expressions, from the most unassertive to the noblest manifestations of all nuances of sober simplicity to ecstatic delight. The horizontal panelling of most of the houses in Stavanger reinforces the modest expression of the facades towards the open spaces. The playful use of carved and highlighted details on the Swiss style houses, introduced in the mid-1800's through the design of railway stations and hotel architecture, became a style also in residential housing during the last part of the 1800's and well into the 1900's, and are often an empathetic contrast to the composed, articulate neo-classic style erected at the same time. These buildings are also well represented in Stavanger as layers of development.

### **Surface treatment**

Wooden buildings have had various surface treatments, depending on the type of building, economic circumstances, traditions and the prevailing style. Older secondary buildings have often been untreated, giving the wood a weathered grey colour. Wood treated with wood tar develops a dark brown, at times almost black, due to fungus. According to Norberg-Schulz, the dark colours of the wooden buildings give "...a necessary basis, and a promise of a cavern-like interior where a refuge may be found"<sup>31</sup> in contrast to the surroundings covered with snow with unsubstantial limits. This is opposed to the white colour of the many coastal cities of Norway as a reflection of the openness towards the sea, with people stretching out to foreign cultures for inspiration.

Well-ventilated panelling of good quality wood can withstand the influence of moisture quite well, even though it is not treated at all. The careful choice and preparation of materials secured the necessary quality. The wooden churches of the middle ages and also other buildings have traditionally been treated with distilled pine tar or cod liver oil – seldom pigmented. The old wooden stave churches stood up well for centuries, due to correct maintenance. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, many churches were given a new baroque inspired ornamentation, and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many of the old stave churches, considered to be dark and small were replaced by new wooden churches with white painted siding. This change of style, reflecting new social circumstances, was also seen in the more unassertive residential houses.

In closed structures, especially in our coastal climate, there is a need for surface treatment, and it also became desirable to give buildings a more attractive appearance. Oil paint has been used as a

preservative for centuries. The oldest colours were natural – oil with pigments of burnt ochre or red iron vitriol.<sup>32</sup> As new colours were developed, houses were painted in colours that had references to stone architecture, and in some cases colours were used to emphasize structural elements. Between 1700 and well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the colour of the house reflected the social status of the owner, as the well to do imported pigments of expensive lead or sink oxide, giving a white colour. This has become the standard in many areas in recent years, for example the white towns of the southern coast of Norway, including Old Stavanger.

Wood as a material has a distinctive transformational quality. It is renewable and at the same time tells a story of history. The fresh scent of a shiny, recently painted wall may have changed the character of the building and the adjacent space, due to a new choice of colour, while the many layers of peeling paint tell about the efforts of many generations to preserve the underlying qualities.

### **The local wooden building tradition**

Eilert Sundt, an early Norwegian “anthropologist”<sup>33</sup> wrote about the quality of workmanship in rural houses he studied: “...It is truly a delight to notice how considerably the sills are laid, how ingeniously the posts of the external gallery are mortised together.... I can not believe otherwise than that even the studied builders of the capital would have to praise this beauty.”<sup>34</sup> He introduced the term ‘byggnings skikk’ - building tradition, or literally: ‘how to build with good conduct, giving harmonious results.’

The lifestyle, work culture and building methods and traditions in the local rural area that has special qualities, can be seen as a ‘cultural language’ that also can be read in the urban building traditions, in sum giving the city a specific identity and a strong atmosphere.

A well-known critic of architecture expresses the same sentiments, advocating a form of traditional conformity in figural language: “...buildings should reflect these harmonies, for architecture is like a language. You cannot construct pleasing sentences in English unless you have a thorough knowledge of the grammatical ground rules. .. Good architecture should be like good manners and follow a recognized code. Civilized life is made more pleasurable by a shared understanding of simple rules of conduct.”<sup>35</sup> Frederik Wulz<sup>36</sup> asserts that the presentation of the façade of a building is a form of communication that approaches the beholder in the urban space. In this respect the meeting between the building and the urban place is a prerequisite for the rhetoric of the façade in promoting representation, impressiveness and gesture. Boullée declared: “Our buildings should to a certain degree be poems!”<sup>37</sup>

It is noticeable that wooden houses, having a low-key gestalt, are less resistance to assault, and are more vulnerable to be abused than buildings of stone and masonry. It seems that once a window opening with its framework has been defined in a masonry building, it will be kept that way. This may be due to structural facts – an arch or a beam over an opening in a stone wall can not be broadened without implementing extensive reinforcement work. A wooden wall on the other hand is light and quite flexible. Large openings can be made with simple measures – a tempting possibility for those not preoccupied with the historic value of the building. This is especially noticeable in the wooden town of Stavanger, where strong commercial forces have cut the façades of the ground floor of many houses in the city centre to pieces, and reducing the poetic expression of the building. Norberg-Schulz would say that the house doesn’t ‘sing’ beautifully any more.

### **What is so special about the wooden buildings of Stavanger?**

Structures of wood have been used many places. In Europe, almost every country – even those that have had limited supplies of timber have had buildings consisting more or less of timber. Wood has also been used extensively in other parts of the world - in North America and to some extent in the Far East. Japan is an example of buildings of all types historically being built of timber. The use of solid wooden walls of logs however is more restricted to countries with a good supply of forest resources and a cold climate.

Some have the notion that almost all monumental architecture of significance has been built of stone. In several countries like Norway, China and Japan however, highly developed monumental churches and shrines have been built solely of wood. It has even been contended that the monumental architecture in the Greek temples have their prototypes in wooden structures.<sup>38</sup> In Norway the opposite took place; our wooden structures are an interpretation of stone structures. Even simple homes have ideals that can be traced to prevailing architectural trends in Europe.

Traditional building techniques made efficient use of natural local materials, and of simple, well proven design. In 1900 only about 50 different building materials were in use in Norway, giving a desirable consensus of materiality. Although a large number of new materials have been introduced in recent years, wood as a structural building material and surface material on buildings, defining urban spaces in many Norwegian cities and specifically in Stavanger, has defended its traditional position of a suitable main material, also as the exterior wall covering, influencing the urban environment.

### **Where do we go from here?**

The pressure of development in the last 60 years, calling for more intensive urban land use has changed the scale and the use of materials. The question is: will Stavanger be willing to aspire to be a city known for its wooden environment also in the future? The urban development of Stavanger, with a high activity level and a lack of land for development, has given extremely high real estate prices and consequently a demand for higher floor space ratio. When centrally located small wooden houses increase in value, an imbalance between capital value and income potential occurs, creating pressure to replace the existing buildings with larger ones. This has happened in such a degree that there seems to be a reason for alarm. Many of the 53 houses that have been suggested demolished in various revised zoning plans during the last three years are considered to be worthy of preservation.<sup>39</sup>

The local Director for Cultural Heritage<sup>40</sup> has posed the question, based on the many projects assuming demolition of the existing buildings; is there a real will to preserve the character of the city of wooden houses. Politicians agree in principle<sup>41</sup>, but when decisions about the individual cases are to be made, the principles don't seem to apply then and there. The combination of political ambitions and capital interests can easily seize the soul of the city.

The preservation of the built environment in Stavanger city centre has been given a definite political and cultural focus in recent years. Guidelines<sup>42</sup> for the regulation and preservation of 'The City of Wooden Houses' have been approved, including the post-war buildings of the city, built in the same tradition. There is an expressed political commitment to preserve the distinctive features of the city.<sup>43</sup>

Residential development during the first post-war years was distinguished by wooden structures. A large number of the buildings erected in the outskirts of the central city are noted for the typical two story row houses, subdivided vertically for four families. The use of "light framework", following American techniques was introduced.

Parallel to the development in the peripheral areas for row houses and detached housing, the transformation of the central areas started in the late 70's. This caused a loss of many wooden houses. The idea was to limit the transformation to some of the central areas, based on the dramatic plan of 1946, calling for renewal of the whole city centre. The old city survived, due to lack of readiness for investment, saving the historic urban structure of wooden houses, and Stavanger still has a large amount of the original historic wooden buildings in the area. The most well known area is called "Gamle Stavanger" (Old Stavanger) dating from the late 1700's. This area was unintentionally preserved, due to zoning for industrial proposes shortly after the war. The area was however never developed as planned. Instead, it became the first major issue where the small wooden houses were pointed out as a significant part of the identity of the city as an authentic historical contribution to the genius of the town. Thanks to an enthusiastic architect, who saw the value of the small, dilapidated wooden houses, a proposal for preservation was launched in 1951 for the city planners and executive officials.<sup>44</sup> In 1953 a preliminary plan was barely approved with a minimum

majority vote. The plan incorporated 35 houses. After further studies, the plan was unanimously approved by the city council in 1956. The idea seemed to be completely out of the question to begin with, and the turnabout in the 1950's seems to be a complete "change of paradigm" - a new increased understanding of the 'sense of place' seemed to take over. Both professionals and politicians became gradually more willing to accept the idea that small old low-key wooden houses also are an important part of the identity of the city. The understanding of the value of the heritage of the wooden architecture strengthened the awareness of the city as a characteristic place, consisting mainly of wooden anonymous architecture. "History is one of the central pillars upon which sense of place is based. Cities are complex sets of landscapes, created in different moments of history. The strongest sense of place may thus occur in places that are able to preserve these different layers."<sup>45</sup> Gamle (Old) Stavanger has since been extended to include 173 houses. The area, now refurbished as an attractive residential area near the waterfront of the central harbour, has become the pearl district of Stavanger. Gamle Stavanger was appointed by UNESCO in 1975 - the year of preservation of architecture, as an area worthy of preserving, and is one of Stavanger's most well-known tourist attractions today.

Around the same time, oil-fuelled development intensified a strong need for housing, and new high-rise housing projects were introduced. The wooden town was in danger of losing its character as focus was on the progressive solutions of the international community. High-rise buildings even popped up in the city centre as gigantic, alien 12 story blocks in a landscape of small wooden buildings.<sup>46</sup> The ideals of modernism had found a solution for the 'petty, messy and inflammable building development', and the plans were to erect a series of similar buildings along the street.

Based on socio-economic reasoning, Gullik Kollandsrud<sup>47</sup> took a closer look at the possibilities of small scale building development, looking at the density of traditional cities. He concluded by saying "...the 'city of the canning industry' (hermetikkkbyen) [in Stavanger] was in part built with 'impudent' high density". He showed how the neighbourhood areas of Våland and Storhaug, with small wooden houses in an open chess pattern has a density that could compete with newer suburbs as Ammerud, and parts of Grorud in Oslo, consisting of high-rise buildings. A new understanding of the qualities of the small scale wooden city was dawning, and many of the new residential developments around Stavanger continued to be planned as row houses, 'chained' and 'clustered' developments, and single detached houses. City planners call them 'new rings' to the visible historic rings of development that can be seen on the map of the city,<sup>48</sup> showing the continuous development of small scale building in wood up to the present day.

### **The urban development of the future**

Interviews designed to question goals and attitudes towards the urban development of Stavanger today, have given a somewhat diverse impression of the real understanding of what is necessary to preserve and develop the unique atmosphere of the city:

A local historian with a special interest for the history and development of Stavanger is confident that there is a genuine interest for preserving the ambience of the city: "...I am one of those that believe that people are deeply interested in local traditions, and would be happy if more focus was put on these matters than they have been."<sup>49</sup>

A local politician observes: "...It took time for many to understand how unique the wooden buildings are, [but] after there was a breakthrough in understanding of the matter several years ago, there has been no political dissent. My impression when I speak to others is that the Wooden City of Stavanger is a concept - no doubt about it."<sup>50</sup>

The local Director for Cultural Heritage points out that there is a need to be watchful: "...a great responsibility is put on both the urban planners and others to identify and preserve the quality of the various aspects of the identity the city... because modern planning meddles with the small-scale structure, material quality, and the spaces between [buildings] that is very characteristic of a city like Stavanger."<sup>51</sup>

A senior urban planner has not experienced consistency among politicians: *"...politicians are not always consistent. That is not the nature of politics. ... the [political] parties have incompetent advisors, and I have often wondered: do they even have consultants...?"*<sup>52</sup>

Investors represent an important co-player in urban development. An experienced investor and contractor was asked if there is a genuine will to redevelop with respect, and his understanding was unquestionable: *"...Yes, definitively. The city is being redeveloped continuously, and the authorities are quite clear on this issue. It is flattering to own a building that has been renovated, but it is not easy to get good economy out of it. I believe many do it based on emotions and not economic estimates."*<sup>53</sup>

According to the director of the local craft union, a marked change in attitude has been seen among craftsmen, contractors and suppliers as well as with commissioners towards preserving the traditions of wooden structures. *"...there is a much greater understanding of the value that the old buildings represent, and the importance of preserving their distinctive character than 15 years ago."*<sup>54</sup>

Architects represent a reluctant attitude in questioning if and how the traditional building techniques should be preserved. The local Director for Cultural Heritage is not convinced that architects are interested in building renewal. *"...My experience is that most architects are not interested in old houses. They would rather give them an independent expression, and are reluctant when I ask them to use the vocabulary of the building.... The willingness to be subordinate to the existing is necessary.... There are times when it is appropriate to use an independent expression to do justice to the existing house, ...but they often consider my suggestions to be reactionary.... Most architects are positive to preserving the qualities of the Wooden City, but when they are given a commission and start working with a wooden house, they are not willing to re-use the details belonging to the house."*<sup>55</sup>

This is a sensitive matter in discussing the work of an architect related to preservation of the atmosphere of the city. The self-image of an architect is that they are able to contribute with innovative work, having a high professional standard. It is not desirable, as was the case during the 1800's, to duplicate the style of times past, but to be creative. The prevailing attitude among architects is that our contribution to the built environment should be reflected by contemporary design. This is in opposition to the convictions of historians, ethnologists and some that work with the cultural heritage. There is a massive resistance to making copies, and a displeasure in working with the traditions of yesteryear. It is probably not to be considered arrogance, but more a question of interpretation of the concept of honesty – often corresponding with the some principles for management of the historic built environment.

Stavanger was designated to be the European Cultural Capital in 2008, and in presenting the programme, cultural heritage and development, innovation and quality, environment, aesthetics and architecture were chosen as important parts. A project for development of wooden building culture, called 'Norwegian Wood' was one of the main projects. Architectural competitions have been arranged and building projects implemented. For the municipal leadership, the program was considered to be important means of maintaining focus on the genius of the city. The programme aimed at developing new concepts for 15 innovative and environmentally friendly timber projects, intended to add to the abundant construction traditions still evident in Stavanger. Various types of buildings were planned, ranging from small pavilions to large multi story buildings, primarily of wood. Local architects worked together with international firms to find solutions that were both linked to traditional and innovative use of wood. New products, production methods and rethinking of structural systems in developing a better understanding of the potential of wood as a building material were given special attention.

The prize-winning projects were connected to a building site supplied by the municipality, and both developers and contractors were found. The projects were to be financed and sold on the open market, giving a realistic base for the projects. The buildings were considered to be both a "laboratory" for investigating the potential of new designs and "real life" schemes, taken into use as an integrated part of the natural or built environment.

The cases have showed a love for the material and a willingness to tell architectural narratives, adapting to a given urban situation. New clusters of buildings have given an ambience to new projects in the suburbs of the city that relate to in the older parts of the city centre. The wallscape of

the new projects as well as in the existing built environment confirm the observation of Carles Landry, that: "... Materials matter. Buildings speak to you in different ways through their materials. We notice this especially when they are made just from one material."<sup>56</sup> One can perceive how the use of wood generates a certain character and gives the urban spaces a special atmosphere and identity, due to the fact that the potential and limitations of materials define the common framework.<sup>57</sup>

Profiled projects of the type Norwegian Wood, implemented in a convenient season, are important. Both policy makers and the general public have been reminded that the city has a unique building history, and the incentive to continue to develop the distinctive urban character has been invoked. Implementing the Norwegian Wood project was also a gain for the special environmental effects and ambience that this material is able to generate in the open spaces of the city.

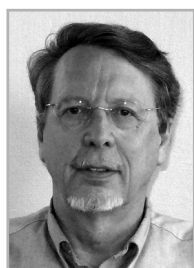
The development of a historical town is however an incremental process, involving authorities, investors, designers, and producers, constantly looking for better solutions where an important aspect always should be the desire to develop the spirit of the city.

In answer to the posed questions, it can be summarized:

Wood as a material is an important factor in giving the city of Stavanger a unique atmosphere, not only as a surface material, but also due to the characteristics of wood as a structural material, defining scale, physical form and detailing. This has in turn influenced the small-scale spatial experience of the urban spaces.

There is unquestionably a mutual acceptance of the fact that wood as a material represents definite qualities that should be preserved and developed, representing a common basis for future urban development. There is nevertheless a distance yet to be covered, to ensure that the common understanding will influence principled decisions and co-ordinated action.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In Norwegian, carried out in 2008 & 2009

<sup>2</sup> Interview with a senior urban planner in Stavanger 10.22.2008

<sup>3</sup> Statistics Norway, June 2009

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. Ca. 67% higher than the average village in Norway. Oslo (3009), Bergen (2387), Trondheim (2509)

<sup>5</sup> Christensen, Arne Lie: Den norske byggeskikken p.236-238

<sup>6</sup> Haaland, Anders: En by tar form.

- <sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p. 33
- <sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p. 297
- <sup>9</sup> Stavanger Bystyres forhandlinger p120-121
- <sup>10</sup> Køhler house referred in Brekke/ Schjelderup: Hus på Vestkysten gjennom 4000 år p. 38
- <sup>11</sup> 2 500 inhabitants in 1815, 14 000 inhabitants in 1860, barely 30 000 inhabitants in 1900 ref: Haaland, Anders: En by tar form p. 59
- <sup>12</sup> Christensen, Arne Lie: Den norske byggeskikken p.31
- <sup>13</sup> Larsen, Knut Einar & Marstein, Lars: Conservation of Historic Timber Structures. Oxford 2000 p.6
- <sup>14</sup> Hjelmeland, Britt-Alise: Husbygging langs kyst og fjord. Oslo 1994 p.29
- <sup>15</sup> *ibid.* p.17
- <sup>16</sup> Christensen, Arne Lie: Den norske byggeskikken p.42
- <sup>17</sup> Wikipedia "Laug"
- <sup>18</sup> Christensen, Arne Lie: Den norske byggeskikken p. 47
- <sup>19</sup> *ibid.* p.42
- <sup>20</sup> Relph, E.:Place and Placelessness 1980 p.64
- <sup>21</sup> Norberg-Schulz, Chr.: Mellom jord og himmel (Between Earth and Heaven) p.32
- <sup>22</sup> *ibid.* p.7
- <sup>23</sup> Relph, E.:Place and Placelessness 1980 p.49
- <sup>24</sup> Norberg-Schulz, Chr.: Existence, Space and Architecture, 1971 p.25
- <sup>25</sup> Norberg-Schulz, Chr.: Mellom jord og himmel p.61
- <sup>26</sup> *ibid.* p.45
- <sup>27</sup> Godal, Jon Bojer: Tre til tekking og kledning 1994 p.36
- <sup>28</sup> Christensen, Arne Lie: Den norske byggeskikken p.70
- <sup>29</sup> Godal, Jon Bojer: Tre til tekking og kledning 1994 p.37
- <sup>30</sup> Wulz, Fredrik F.: Fasaden och stadsrummet : arkitektonisk idé, text och komposition, 1991 p.24
- <sup>31</sup> *ibid.* my translation
- <sup>32</sup> Aanensen, Brønne & Drange: Gamle Trehus p.368
- <sup>33</sup> 1817 - 1875
- <sup>34</sup> Sundt, Eilert: Bygningssskik paa Bygderne i Norge, 1900 p.9
- <sup>35</sup> HRH, The Prince of Wales: A Vision of Britain, 1989, p.80
- <sup>36</sup> Wulz, Frederik: Fasaden & stadsrummet Stockholm 1991 p.81
- <sup>37</sup> Boullée EL: Architektur-Abhandlung über die Kunst 1987 p.44
- <sup>38</sup> Larsen, Knut Einar & Marstein, Lars: Conservation of Historic Timber Structures. Oxford 2000 p.34
- <sup>39</sup> Norwegian Broadcasting Company, local news 20.3.2007 in interview with historian Carl Buch.
- <sup>40</sup> byantikvar Anne Merethe Skogland
- <sup>41</sup> Helge Solum Larsen, city council member, (V)
- <sup>42</sup> Stavanger kommune: Estetiske retningslinjer for Trehusbyen (Aesthetic guidelines for the Wooden City) with legal authority in the Plan and Building Act § 74
- <sup>43</sup> Larsen, Helge Solum, city council member, (V)
- <sup>44</sup> Bergsgard, Unnleiv, 2005: "Stavangers bebyggelse 1945-1965 'Den sosialdemokratiske orden'" in Stavanger Museum Årbok (Yearbook) 2005
- <sup>45</sup> Herzog, Lawrence A.2006: "Return to the Centre" Austin, University of Texas Press – p. 8
- <sup>46</sup> In Pedersgaten, Løkkeveien and other places.
- <sup>47</sup> Kollandsrud, Gullik: Trehusbyen – kan den gjenskapes? (Can the wooden city be re-created?), 1978, p.90



- <sup>48</sup> Stavanger municipality: Nyere 'årringer' til Trehusbyen Stavanger, 2008
- <sup>49</sup> Interview 9.25.2008
- <sup>50</sup> Interview 10.22.2008 with a central politician dealing with urban development
- <sup>51</sup> Interview with the local Director for Cultural Heritage 8.29.2008
- <sup>52</sup> Interview with a senior urban planner in Stavanger 10.22.2008
- <sup>53</sup> Interview with a local investor and contractor 12.04.2008
- <sup>54</sup> Interview 12.09.2008
- <sup>55</sup> Interview 08.29.2008
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