

Using the past to build a town's image

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Abstract

During the 1990s many European cities, including the Norwegian cities, stressed image building as cultural cities. Growth in the so-called “cultural economy” is strongly linked to a need in the post-industrial towns for new businesses. Culture has been viewed as an instrument for economical development and is used as a strategy to rejuvenate city centres. This includes a wide spectrum of creative activities, and a new interest for active use of cultural heritage assets in the image building of towns and cities has developed. Heritage has been ascribed a new role in the process of revitalising city centres. Based on empirical studies in two Norwegian towns the paper discusses whether this renewed interest has set marked stamps on the urban environments or whether it has a more superficial character in an attempt to keep up with international trends.

Keywords: cultural heritage management, urban studies, area planning.

1 Introduction

In the new “image-building” or “spectacularisation” (Vaz and Jacques [2]) that takes place in contemporary cities, both new and old cultural monuments are being created. What is remembered, as tradition or heritage, is selected from a vast range of built, natural and cultural environments. Based on the results from an empirical case-study of a selection of towns, where interviews, document studies and field observations play an important role as primary sources, this paper will focus on the role cultural heritage plays in Norwegian urban development today and will be looking more closely at what strategies are chosen to integrate cultural heritage in urban planning processes. Does the new interest for use of cultural heritage present a new dimension in planning, which has changed the direction for community development? How does the new interest for preservation of cultural heritage affect the established methods used by the cultural heritage management and does it promote development of new



management methods? These questions are raised in an interdisciplinary research project; “Cultural heritage and place identity” where researchers from The Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage Research (NIKU), The Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR) and The Norwegian University of Life Sciences (UMB) are collaborating.

This paper presents preliminary results from the project and the main questions in focus here are: Is there a shared understanding between the cultural heritage management and the municipal planners in towns today about what aspects should be given prominence in town centres? And if not – along what lines do we find that conflicting interests arise?

2 Perspectives

City- and town municipalities today often use culture as a way of creating an up-to-date profile in accordance to advice received from professional “branders” and image-builders (Marling and Zerlang [5]). Heritage has been ascribed a new role in this process of revitalising city centres, adding a touch of soul and identity to a place. Cultural heritage is not primarily based in history as such, but has to do with how the contemporary society makes use of the past to fulfil present needs. This definition of cultural heritage is in accordance with the definition presented by Graham *et al.* [6]. As part of this process both new and old cultural monuments have been created, and cultural heritage has experienced a turn from being a field of interest among experts to represent a new niche for investors.

Dynamic urban development requires a balance between a need for drawing up paramount objectives with long-range policy and the possibility to attend to immediate and urgent needs. Different forces create various forms of tensions and conflicts in the urban context – tensions between wishes of allowing change and wishes of retaining originality of structures and tensions between economic pressure to redevelop, including architectural creativity and wishes of “enhancement” of structures and contexts, as illustrated by Larkham in his generalised model [7:18]. Many cities consist of heterogenic cultural environments where buildings from several hundred years are standing side by side with buildings from recent years. Cultural heritage assets are only one of many interests that have to be taken into consideration in urban transformation processes. When new building activities take place cultural heritage assets will often get affected, but whether the consequences are of positive or negative nature depends on various factors, including the role the cultural heritage management plays in the initial phase of the planning process. Major studies have been made of urban transformation processes in Norway, particularly Oslo. However, how urban transformation processes influence the situation cultural heritage assets find themselves in is still largely unexplored in Norway. Internationally there is an ongoing debate about these complex issues (see for instance Monclus and Guardia [8], Bontje and Mustard [9], Butler [10], Evans [3], Pinder [4]).

The creation of urban images is part of the global economy. One of the most important challenges in urban development today is to see how these landscapes



are created, and understand them as interplay between politics, culture and market. A mix of factors including increasing wealth, de-industrialisation, the EU extension and global competition has set new conditions for European urban development (Bontje and Musterd [9]). As part of a broader process of inter-urban competition, city governments have increasingly sought to “position” themselves as centres of creativity. In these branding initiatives, culture is viewed as a tool of urban regeneration and economic development (Rantisi and Leslie [11]).

Concerning the methodology in use, three main groups of material will be included in the final study:

- Document studies of the main planning documents.
- A review of a selection of articles in the local newspaper concerning development project of current relevance for cultural heritage management.
- Semi-structured interviews with the main actors in the planning processes including case handlers of the building processes in the municipal administration. A selection of politicians will be included in the total group of informants, as well as central informant from the cultural heritage management as well as representatives of relevant NGOs.

This paper is primarily basing the discussions on a selection of interviews made so far with representatives for the regional cultural heritage management and NGOs, studies of a small selection of plans as well as secondary sources, i.e. primarily local historic literature.

3 Presentation of preliminary results

3.1 Case 1: Arendal

3.1.1 Background

Arendal is a city and municipality in the county of Aust-Agder and belongs to the geographical region Sørlandet. In 1992 the town centre merged with four of the neighbouring municipalities and with just under 40 000 inhabitants, it is the tenth largest town in Norway.

Arendal was first mentioned as a ships port in 1528 but received its privileges as provincial town much later; in 1723. It based its economical foundation on export of timber and later import of grain. Gradually the shipping trade gained a position and for a short period in the 1850es Arendal was the largest shipping town in Scandinavia. In 1877 approximately 500 ships were registered here. Bad times in the 1880es and speculation however led to a commercial crash and a lot of the shipping companies as well as town merchants went bankrupt. Today boatbuilding is still a vivid craft and modern production of boats in reinforced plastic has grown to be an important business in the municipality. Since the early 1990's, the town has also seen a noticeable growth in the information technology field, along with other trades and industries (Frøstrup and Frøstrup [12], Molden and Havran [13]).



3.1.2 Demarcation of the town centre

In this study, the focus is primarily directed towards Arendal's town centre. The boarder is fixed in south to the coast line, west by Kittilsbukt, north by the Town square and east by Barbu, a former hamlet included in Arendal in 1992.

The built-up area in Arendal consisted originally of wooden buildings primarily. However, two fires in 1863 and 1868 lay large parts of Arendal waste. As a result parts of the center of town were regulated with brick buildings. Some areas with wooden buildings escaped the fires, and Tyholmen is today a highly appreciated area of town. One of the remarkable buildings in this area is the old Town Hall. It was built by a merchant in 1815 as his private residence, sold to the municipality in 1844 and has been in use as The Town Hall up till very recently. It consists of five stories and is the tallest wooden building in Norway.

Today an established understanding of the importance of safeguarding wooden buildings from this period is shared by a considerable amount of town dwellers. However the discussions were strong and the arguments against preservation were many when the first preservation decisions were made by decision-making authorities in 1973. When the first resolution were made to regulate the whole area to preservation purposes in 1976, Arendal was among the first towns in Norway to develop such extensive plans for a larger area Kommunedelplan for bevaring [14]. In the presentation of the built-up-area in the Municipality's Preservation Plan, a series of today's challenges are listed: changes made in the visual character of the place caused by gradually rebuilding of single buildings – problems caused by upgrading to contemporary standards by using modern building materials and technical methods – disturbances caused by placing buildings randomly to gain compact areas – challenges raising when former attics are transformed to flats – problems occurring when trying to fit in cars and parking in old areas – the need of paying special attention to the surroundings of single building, like squares, old streets, walls, steps and plantation.

In addition to the preservation plans developed by the decision-making authorities, there are various strategic plans and documents at municipality level where heritage and preservation are mentioned. One of these plans stresses that *"Arendal has a classic and beautiful urban core. The town is big enough to have urban qualities and just small enough to have retained the charm and intimacy of a small town. In a national context there is an increasing interest for historic town cores as a place of residence, as a place for studies, for office- and commercial based businesses and as an arena for adventure involving culture and pleasures"* Urbane trender og sentrumsutvikling [15]. Culture and heritage is in other words used as a way of profiling the town as an attractive place for students and young families to establish themselves.

3.1.3 Conflicting interests concerning urban development

Three recent cases where conflicting views reign will be listed. The problems they portray will be further discussed in paragraph 4.

- Extending one of the hotels in the preservation zone (C1.1).
- Allowing a shopping mall to expand into an old established area (C1.2).



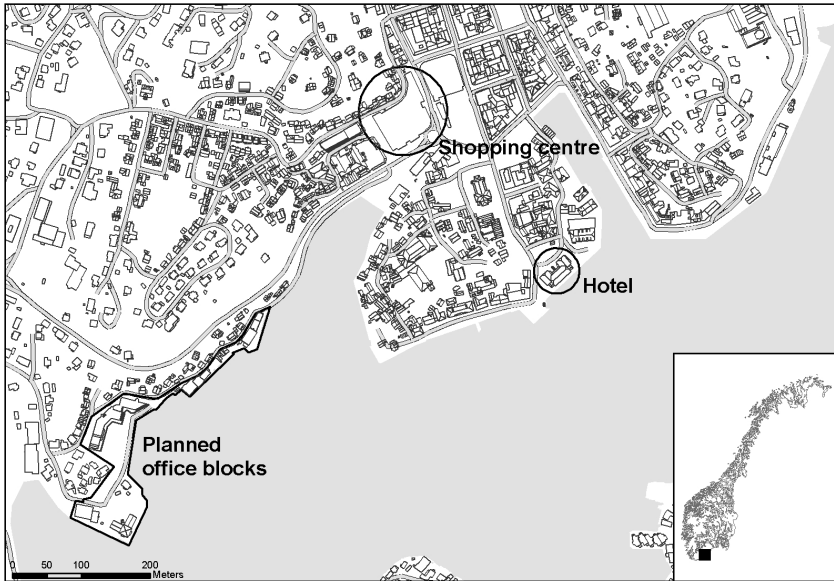


Figure 1: Demarcation of Arendal's town centre.

- Kittilsbukt – plans for building in the coastal zone (representative maritime business- and office building) (C1.3)

Case 2: Ålesund

3.1.4 Background

Ålesund is a town and municipality in the county of Møre og Romsdal and belongs to the geographical region of Sunnmøre, Norway. According to the population census the town had just over 41 300 inhabitants in 2007. The municipality covers a wide stretched area that includes three islands. A central feature in the town centre is Brosundet, the strait where Aspøya is linked to Nørvøya by the town's bridge. It became a popular port because it was situated close to rich fishing grounds, and the strait provided a safe harbour. The settlement stems from the 14th century when the first fishing merchants settled here. The town received its first restricted privileges as provincial town in 1793. Its economy was founded on the production of dry cod, clipfish that gradually became an important export article (Grytten [16]). The town is today a central trade region and large-scale fishing, shipbuilding and sea related service industries play important economic roles. Another important niche is the tourist marked. One disaster in recent history that had major consequences for the further development of Ålesund town was a large fire that broke out on 23rd January 1904, and between 850-900 buildings burnt down (Grytten and Havran [17]).

3.1.5 Demarcation of the town centre

The demarcation of the study area is done to include the rebuilding of the town centre after the devastating fire in 1904. The boarder follows the so-called “brick zone” and is fixed in the south by the coastline. Aspegata marks the western boarder for the area that was rebuilt in stone in the period 1904-1907 and Grensegata constitutes the eastern boarder of this zone. There were some distinct regulations the architects and builders involved in the rebuilding had to relate to: all had to be built in brick or stone, maximum height was set to fifteen meters, new regulations for roofing, degree of usages per premises etc. It resulted in a series of buildings with apparently similar appearance, but each with a certain degree of individuality and character. For the most part the old street plan was retained, with narrow streets that wind their way up and down hill (Grytten and Havran [16]). Ålesund is often named “Jugendbyen” – the town built in Jugend-style or Art Nouveau which is a more common term for the style internationally. It was an architectural style in common use in Europe in the period the town centre was rebuilt. Many of the architects – about 50 in all – that came to town had as part of their training travelled abroad. This is likely to be part of the explanation why the jugend style is so prominent in the town (Grytten *et al.* [18]). There are influences from prevailing styles from both England and Germany, but primarily each architect contributed with his own trace of individuality and contrast. There are clear indications of the two main lines of development, the national romantic and the international, European vogue. There is an extensive use of ornaments, both national influenced from stave church architecture and Viking ships and the more international influenced decorations, examples various flower motives and female heads (Grytten and Havran [16]).

Both art and architectural historians have shown interest for the particular version of the Art Noveau-style found in Ålesund, and it is well documented today thanks to these and other contributions (see for instance Tschudi-Madsen [19], Tvinnereim [20] Myklebust [21], Grytten *et al.* [18]). The Directorate of Cultural Heritage, the Historic Buildings Association, UNESCO, the Ålesund Museum and local authorities have all shown increasing concern for the Jugend buildings in Ålesund. Ten buildings in Ålesund are today classified as listed buildings by the Directorate of Cultural Heritage. The first area development plan with a preservation proposal included came from the head of the town planning administration (Høydal [22]). No resolutions were carried out at that point, but the existing governing plan for the town centre from 1986 contains clauses concerning changes in valuable jugend buildings. The Directorate of Cultural Heritage initiated that a preservation and town-forming plan were developed in 1992 in cooperation with the county and municipality authorities. The plan was meant to strengthen the interest for safeguarding the unique architectural heritage and urban environment as well as provide inputs to the municipal planners in the further process with developing new municipal plans and revision of the existing governing plan for the town centre. The plan from 1992 is a rather comprehensive and detailed plan still in active use, but it has been argued from several of the parties involved, including the municipal



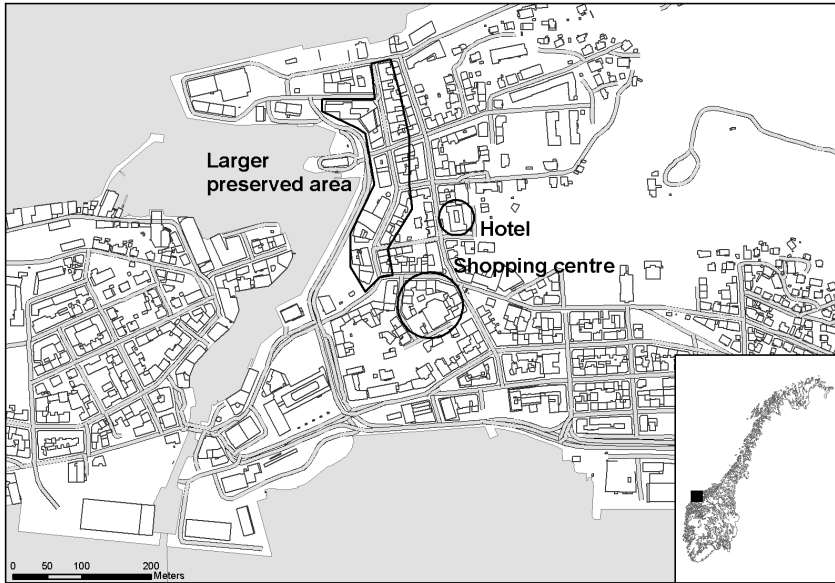


Figure 2: Demarcation of Ålesund's town centre.

planner themselves, that the plan now is in need of revision (information from interviews).

3.1.6 Conflicting interests concerning urban development

The cases listed below are chosen to illustrate some of the problems a town with seemingly strong intention of safeguarding the built environment is facing. The problems they portray will be further discussed in paragraph 4.

- Allowing a shopping mall in the preservation zone to expand: different views on whether the project has managed to maintain sufficient degree of authenticity. The Norwegian Directorate for Cultural Heritage played a role here (C2.1)
- Extending one of the hotels in the preservation zone resulted in the inside of several jugend style buildings being pulled down (C2.2)
- Kongens gate, the town's parade street with a series of valuable jugend building gradually being emptied of the original functions (C2.3)

4 Discussion

In this section the two case studies will be compared and discussed in light of the two questions raised initially. The first question concerns the amount of agreement and understanding that exists about what aspects should be given prominence in town centres.



The two towns have several common traits: they are towns where the cultural heritage issues have been discussed for a rather long time and they are both examples of towns where the local authorities have cooperated with the cultural heritage authorities in developing plans that were considered rather encompassing for their time. They are also towns with a rather large portion of tourists visiting in the summer season. They both acknowledge that their combination of a proud maritime history, impressing surrounding coastal landscape with natural beauty and built-up areas with architectural and historic interests is well suited as a frame for profiling the towns to visitors. There is in other words a common understanding today between the cultural heritage management and the local municipality authorities about the framework they are working within.

When it comes to the second question – along what lines we find that conflicting interests arise – we find that such cases most often in situations where the promotion of businesses, new workplaces, development of central residential areas and commerce bring unwanted impacts on the cultural historic environment. They fit as exemplifications of Larkham's generalized model of tension in urban environments referred to earlier: between wishes of allowing change and wishes of retaining originality of structures – between economic pressure to redevelop, including architectural creativity – and wishes of “enhancement” of structures and contexts (Larkham [7]).

Adjusting old buildings and urban structures to new functions raises a need for considerable modifications. Relevant examples from the two towns are for instance the problems up-to-date hotel standards can cause (C.1.1 – C.2.2). The hotel in question in Arendal (C.1.1) is situated right on the coastal zone. It was originally built in 1987 close to the preservation zone and just approximately 500 meters away from the Old Town Hall. It is owned by one of the central industry owners in town. A need for expansions arose for this hotel placed in the most attractive area of town. The extension was recently finished and the building is now a rather compact and bulky building in what contemporary architects often name “contrasting architectural design”, with an extensive use of plate-glass windows in the new wing. The cultural heritage management made a statement when the planning permission was discussed, but raised no formal objections. The spokesmen that argued for allowing the extension to be built used as argument that several new buildings had already got building permission on that half of the island. The hotel-case in Ålesund has some parallels (C2.2). The hotel was originally established in a central part of the brick building zone. To be able to up-date the hotel to a standard the owner found in accordance with today's demands, he wanted to expand the hotel by building a new section consisting of nine floors and expand into the neighbouring quarters. The result was that the inside of two neighbouring jugend buildings of varying qualities were pulled down leaving the facades intact to ensure that the visual structure of the historic streetscape were kept. The cultural heritage management raised some minor objections, but according to other heritage NGO's spokesmen the objections were far too vague and feeble to be able to reach through to the planning authorities. The hotel extension is under construction at present. It has led to a



rather cool climate between several parties promoting cultural heritage interests in the town (information from interviews). Both cases of hotel expansions are well suited to illustrate the point Larkham make about the architect profession's articulated need to make space for creative praxis. A rather fine balance exists between keeping the overall urban historic structure intact and allowing room for development and creativity.

Other examples of modern functions that justify discussions are the changes that have taken place in consume patterns, leading to a demand for larger units under one roof but still offering a varied selection of products and services. Relevant examples from the two towns are the problems the establishment of shopping malls close to the old town centre create (C.1.2 – C.2.1). In Arendal the process started up after a new “flagship” The Town Culture and Town Hall was built in 2004 in the middle of town, right opposite the Town Church. It has created a lot of vitality in this part of town. An old shopping centre that was already established in this area, applied for planning permission to expand. The expansion included a shopping mall on the first floor and flats on the next four floors. The cultural heritage management objected to the expansion due to the incursions the building made on an old historic road. The objections were not taken into consideration, and today the shopping mall and the flats are in use. Local politicians have later confessed that they did not realise at that stage that the shopping com flat-unit would rise so high in the landscape and make so much contrast in the vulnerable surrounding landscape (C.1.2). Very recently planning permission was given to another building project that will start up in the neighbouring area on the western side, and an office building will be built close to the coast line and visually function as a continuation of the modern shopping com flat – unit (C.1.3). The extension of the shopping mall and the building of the flats have by some representatives of different NGO's been accused of emptying other part of the town centre for shops and dweller, referring to the old Town Market Place and its surrounding built-up quarters. This example has clearly some parallels to the situation found in Ålesund concerning Kongens gate – the town's parade street. This street has a series of valuable recently restored jugend buildings. To stimulate its character as a lively streetscape it was turned into a pedestrian shopping street in 2000. However it has gradually been emptied of the original functions (C2.3). After the extension of the shopping centre in the neighboring street Storgata, what is now left of functions in Kongens gate are primarily offices and flats after several shopkeepers decided to sell out. What are lacking today are more people in the streetscape in the parade street. The views concerning how successful the extension of the shopping centre is from a historic point of view differs between various cultural heritage actors, including the NGOs. It has however succeeded in providing a counter point in the town center to the gigantic shopping mall established in the urban fringe area of Ålesund. (A more detailed discussing of the case can be found in Roald [23], Schröder [24].)



5 Conclusion

As shown in this paper, there is today a shared understanding between the cultural heritage management and the municipal planners in the two towns on a general level that the cultural heritage represents vital assets and their safeguarding is included in the municipal plans. A lot of today's planning however is project-based and stems from private initiatives. Ideally the private initiated plans could have been based on the framework set in paramount plans, but the actually situation reveals that many plans that are promoted are in opposition to such plans. Larger historic built-up areas might fragment and gradually loose their anchoring in the urban structure. The way a project-based urban development and a reduced role of paramount planning affect the possibility to safeguard connections and contexts for cultural heritage assets in urban areas is to a large extent unknown and needs further studies.

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