

Urban Maestro

New governance strategies
for Urban Design

Oslo waterfront regeneration

governing quality urban design (NO)

Heidi Bergsli

Norwegian Institute of
Urban and Regional
Research

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1. BACKGROUND CONDITIONS: BUILDING VISIONS AS A DESIGN STRATEGY FOR OSLO – THE FJORD CITY

Oslo's central waterfront has, since the 1970s, been the target of design policies aimed to reconnect the seaside and the fjord with the urban landscape.

The Fjord city is a project established by the municipality of Oslo to govern and plan waterfront development by ensuring connectivity, accessibility and design quality in eleven sub-areas that are being developed by public, pseudo-public and private companies. The governance of the Fjord city and the Bjørvika sub-area includes a systematic approach in which a combination of formal and informal quality delivery tools is used. Bjørvika's success as a quality place lies in the role of public spaces and arenas that complement a high-density built environment.

This paper will discuss how networked governance and the use of a set of design tools have secured place-based qualities in Bjørvika, which have resulted from a long-term process in which building vision and spatial cohesion have been key factors in developing the Fjord city project, and the use of a toolkit of soft design tools at Bjørvika's sub-area level.

2. A CIVIC INITIATIVE TO REIMAGINE OSLO

Oslo's central waterfront was mainly used for industrial and transport purposes until the 1960s. Restructuring the waterfront was firstly conceived of as both a necessity and an opportunity, specifically an opportunity to apply urban design principles as means of economic restructuring and for the accommodation of more recreational offers in the 270 hectares of seaside areas designated for new land-use.

The idea to *act* upon the opportunities did not come from the city government. Instead, the concept of the Fjord city was borne out of an initiative undertaken by the Association of Norwegian Landscape Architects and the Oslo Heritage Society to construct a shared vision and cultivate a broad partnership through the Nordic concept competition entitled "The City and the Fjord - Oslo year 2000." The aim was to redevelop Oslo's central waterfront as a means to address deindustrialisation, a

declining economy, poor fiscal resources, and the flight of Oslo's inhabitants and businesses to the wider city-region.¹

Oslo's planning port authorities played central roles by co-financing and advising the competition and by taking part in the jury's assessment and ranking of the submitted proposals. Banks, insurance, and shipping companies also funded the competition, together with the Aker industrial group that owned a key lot of land. The jury established to assess the proposals was composed of representatives from the Aker group, Oslo's planning director, and the city's harbour director, alongside architects and landscape architects. With these new public-private partnerships formed, participative principles were enshrined in Oslo's planning processes in order to ensure the inclusion of broad perspectives and debates.

The concept competition resulted in almost 200 proposals and much public attention and debate when they were exhibited. The jury awarded six projects and bought thirteen others. Based on their ideas and propositions, the jury formulated recommendations that the city authorities could use as design principles in future plans. The lasting results of this event was the establishment of a quality culture in which consensus was built around the shared vision that quality places at Oslo's seaside should be based on the concepts of urban compactness, multi-functionality, recreation and accessible public space. This vision has been enhanced by a focus on Oslo as a green city, yet it took nearly two decades to achieve political consensus regarding the Fjord city. The overall vision of the waterfront project was thereby consolidated in parallel with the development of the first sub-areas, even as late as the 2000s.

3. VISION PLANNING AS A SOFT TOOL FOR COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE

Vision planning aims to draw models, or scenarios, of the future in which technical and political goals are brought together among public and private agents.² The aim of scenario building is to address uncertainties about future needs and wants, and thereby to apprehend tendencies in a long-term perspective. In Oslo, the establishment of a quality culture and the use of vision planning was a basis for the

¹ Oslo Heritage Society (1983). The city and the fiord: Oslo year 2000 (Material in Norwegian). St. Hallvard. Tidsskrift for byhistorie, miljø og debatt, 83(1+2), Oslo.

² Fabbro, S. & Mesolella, A. (2010). Multilevel Spatial Visions and Territorial Cohesion: Italian Regional Planning between the TEN-T corridors, ESDP polycentrism and Governmental 'Strategic Platforms'. Planning Practice & Research, 25(1) : 25-48.

planning authorities to build such scenarios given that it represents a type of informal quality delivery tool that is both analytical and explorative.

In the mid-2000s, Oslo's planning authorities organised a series of workshops to which cross-disciplinary consultant groups (mainly composed of architects and engineers) were invited to work on three scenarios: Oslo Park (the natural landscape), Network (connecting people and places) and Oslo Large (a metropolitan development). Researchers and planners were invited to critically discuss the scenarios and debate on them. The results of the workshop were exhibited and become subject to public discourse, but it was first and foremost a *professional* event in which decisions about the overarching Fjord city plan could be informed by analytical considerations.

As a means to engage the range of stakeholders in the sub-areas surrounding the shared vision of a green, connected, and multifunctional waterfront development, the municipality emphasised the mutual benefits of investments that are based on a division of tasks and responsibilities in public-private partnerships.³



The Fjord city sub-areas. Source: Oslo Municipality (2009).

³ Oslo Municipality (2005). 3x Fjord city an exhibition of the results of the Oslo charette Oslo Waterfront 2030 (Material in Norwegian). Agency for Planning and Building Services, Oslo Municipality, Oslo.

The Fjord city plan adopted by Oslo City Council in 2008 included overarching principles for the entire seaside, given that the Fjord city should contribute to Oslo's regional and national role alongside promoting sustainability through new offers of public transport, increased accessibility, social diversity and the presence of nature. The plan offers formal guidance tools that secure place qualities by focusing on public space and cultural offers. Three examples illustrate how these tools are applied in the Fjord city plan: first, the plan establishes that a broad (10-20 meters) harbour promenade shall be developed through all sub-areas as a standard. Second, the eleven sub-areas must include public spaces and at least one park in their perimeter plans. Third, the sub-areas shall also have a cultural programme that secures quality in architecture, landscape and public spaces and a focus on urban recreation and culture.⁴ This latter guidance tool aims to offer a flexible design framework that can promote recreational and aesthetical qualities.

How these different principles have been integrated into the plan as guidance tools and are used in the sub-area of Bjørvika illustrates their role in the delivery of quality places. The case of Bjørvika further illustrates how new network governance models can ensure effective coordination and operation when highly complex areas are being developed.

4. BJØRVIKA: PLACE QUALITY DELIVERED THROUGH COLLABORATION AND A DESIGN TOOLKIT

Bjørvika is Oslo's "black swan," with 70 hectares of land having transformed from what was once complicated industrial and infrastructural land-use into an expansion of the city centre and resulting new neighbourhoods. This area is located in the eastern portion of the central waterfront, where the railway system has blocked access from the neighbouring districts. What facilitated this transformation and ultimately allowed for Bjørvika's transformation into a quality place were a successful networked governance model and the use of a complex toolkit that offered inventive building blocks.

⁴ Oslo Municipality (2008). The Fjord city plan. Principles for the overarching development of the Fjord city and sub-areas. Plan programme for Filipstand, Vippetangen and the outlet of Alna (Material in Norwegian). Agency for Planning and Building Services, Oslo Municipality, Oslo.



3D model of Bjørvika and the Oslo S-area. Source: www.bjorvikautvikling.no/3d-modell/ (September 2020).

4.1. Networked governance in Bjørvika

The redevelopment of Bjørvika was prioritised in Oslo's redevelopment policies as early as the mid-1980s. This was due to the fact that Bjørvika was a complicated area, since not only had the pre-existing port structures and infrastructure been obstacles to redevelopment, but so had the transport systems. Next to Oslo's central train station was Bjørvika—which could be considered “a monument” to modernist planning, given its favour for land-use for road systems and port infrastructure—that had come to be seen as a hodgepodge of concrete and pollution. All of this meant that Bjørvika had been fragmented and lacked any spatial connection.⁵ The massive material constructions and complicated ownership structures were obstacles to be overcome, requiring public-public and public-private cooperation, as well as improved connections with Bjørvika's surroundings.

Though Oslo Municipality is the main public authority in charge, the central state and national governments are crucially involved in the development of the Fjord city. In the case of Bjørvika, its redevelopment fully depended on central state engagement, since a solution for the state highway was a prerequisite. The solution to this issue was ultimately an underwater tunnel, which was launched as part of the national transport plans in the 1980s.⁶ Another prerequisite was the establishment of an agreement with the landowners (the largest being Oslo Port Authorities and

⁵ Aspen, J. (1997). På sporet av Oslo. In J. Aspen & J. Pløger (Eds.), *På sporet av byen: lesninger av senmoderne byliv*. Spartacus, Oslo.

⁶ White Paper 28 (2001-2002). Development of Bjørvika. Ministry of Labour and Government Administration, Oslo.

Norwegian Railways), with the smaller shares initially being held by private real estate companies.

Bjørsvika Utvikling AS is owned by [HAV Eiendom AS](#) and [Oslo S Utvikling AS](#), with shares in Bjørsvika Utvikling AS of 66 percent and 34 percent respectively, reflecting the ownership distribution of the areas developed in Bjørsvika. HAV Eiendom AS is owned by the Oslo Port Authorities, while Oslo S Utvikling AS was established in 2001, and is owned by Entra ASA, Linstow AS, and Norwegian Railways' real estate company, Bane NOR Eiendom AS (11 percent the companies involved are private).

Negotiations between the owners in the early 2000s resulted in the establishment of the Bjørsvika Utvikling AS company (Bjørsvika Development limited) and its daughter company Bjørsvika Infrastruktur (Bjørsvika Infrastructure limited). The central state and the municipality are hence indirectly involved through these property development companies. More specifically, the property is owned by HAV Eiendom and OSU, while Bjørsvika Infrastruktur is responsible for developing the public spaces and technical infrastructure on their behalf. This agreement between the public shareowners established their respective financial responsibilities, and more importantly assessed that Bjørsvika Infrastruktur will finance and develop the physical infrastructure, whereas the Municipality of Oslo will finance and develop the social infrastructure such as kindergartens and a school.⁷ A clause that secures the quality of physical infrastructure is that each square metre of property sold should yield at least 2500 NOK (index-regulated from 2003) for the development of public space. Once developed by Bjørsvika Infrastruktur, the public spaces in the area will become the Municipality of Oslo's property and responsibility. The agreement includes the clauses that HAV Eiendom provides a loan to Bjørsvika Infrastruktur, and that the public landowners can extensively develop housing and office buildings. If there are any obstacles to this, their obligations to provide technical infrastructure are reduced accordingly. This implies that the Municipality of Oslo incurs no direct financial risk.

The agreement was also committed to via a city council decision made in 2001 that was grounded in the recommendations of four international consultancy groups, and the subsequent evaluation made by the municipal and state owners of land and infrastructure in Bjørsvika. On this basis, the city council's decision established a division of Bjørsvika into four areas, each with its own functional profile and architectural character. The principles adhered to in the division of these areas aimed to ensure quality measures, such as building heights, city life and aesthetic

⁷ White Paper 28 (2001-2002). Development of Bjørsvika. Ministry of Labour and Government Administration, Oslo.

demands for public spaces, streets and buildings, which were also listed and later included in the regulation plan.

The regulation plan for Bjørvika developed by the land owners in close collaboration with the municipality was adopted by the Oslo City Council in 2003 as a fixed legal framework which controls the development (e.g. of social and technical infrastructure, public space, cultural heritage conservation and pollution) and construction-related regulation (such as housing, office buildings and parking). As much as 40 percent of the area (of 70 hectares) is reserved for parks, public spaces and the harbour promenade, with another 20 percent allocated to the street grid. By 2019, the footprint of the buildings is lower than what had been envisioned in the plan (reduced to 31% and the street grid augmented to 29%).⁸

Enclosed within the regulation plan are non-juridical guidance tools that include a cultural programme, a design handbook and an overarching environmental programme, aimed at assuring aesthetic, cultural and environmental high quality and spatial cohesion. Additionally, the cultural programme and design handbook offer extensive guidelines and a set of indicators, yet allow the developers and landscape architects room to interpret and translate the principles of the guidelines for their respective projects.

4.2. Cultural programming to enhance place quality

An inventive process of cultural planning was undertaken in Bjørvika, based on the City Council's following remarks on the regulation plan and the demand for a cultural programme:

Bjørvika as the gate to Norway's capital should stand out as an expression of modern Norwegian urban culture and create pleasure and pride for Oslo's entire population; it should include broad cultural offers; locate public and private cultural institutions in the district, and accommodate temporary artistic production in the construction period.⁹

⁸ Reported by Bjørvika Development, retrieved at https://www.bjorvikautvikling.no/portfolio-item/bruken_offentligrom/ October 26, 2020.

⁹ Bjørvika Information centre (2003). Sustainability in Bjørvika. Cultural Programme (p.7), as adopted by City council 08/27/2003) (Material in Norwegian). Oslo.

The cultural programme was developed as a tool to meet the city council's aspirations, but also to consider and reflect upon the general, public expectations of Bjørvika.

Statsbygg, the national government's property manager, and the development company of Norwegian Railways, developed the programme in cooperation with two consultancies, with the aim of providing both a guide and a source of inspiration to Bjørvika's developers, investors and users in cultural matters. Representatives from the cultural and business sectors were assembled to inform the programme, which was also the subject to a public hearing before it was ultimately adopted by the city council in 2003. The process included the cultural sector but not broader public participation, thus it did not voice public expectations directly.

The city council's demand that available spaces be used for temporary activities during the development process was adopted in the cultural programme, which emphasises that "a strong cultural offer can be a first-mover in the off-set of a positive economic development process, [and] it can contribute to a positive image and the establishment of Bjørvika in the awareness of various users."¹⁰ The image of Bjørvika people had was one of industry, inaccessible to the population for a century and a half and thus not something they readily included whenever they envisioned Oslo's geography.

In 2004 and 2005, temporary activities contributed to artistic creation and the creative use of space. A wide range of cultural activities - art exhibitions, installations, concerts and performances - were organised in warehouses that would soon be demolished. Bjørvika was thereby discovered by Oslo's inhabitants and put on the map during its transition phase. These temporary cultural activities thus constituted a tool for exploration prior to the design of the area.

Bjørvika Utvikling has later programmed additional art projects, both temporary and permanent, with the company having invested one percent of Bjørvika Infrastructure's investment budget in art (20 million NOK, with 75 percent of the art budget used to fund permanent installations in public spaces and 25 percent for temporary art activities).

Meanwhile, the results of the cultural programme testify to the role of art in making Bjørvika attractive, with the decision by the national government to locate the Oslo City Opera house in the area having boosted its attractiveness. The architectural design of the opera house has proven vital to its success, since it has expanded this cultural arena through the inventive provision of public space.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*:13.

5. A QUALITY PUBLIC ARENA

The Norwegian government's decision to relocate the Norwegian Opera and Ballet to Bjørvika was made on the arguments of place quality, following a lengthy political debate about its location, and an opera house seeking relocation for much of the 20th century.

A broad political majority in the Norwegian Parliament supported the construction of a new opera house, but there was no agreement about its location. Relocation at the western seaside, at Vestbanen, was favoured by representatives of the Opera and Ballet and many politicians as it would finalise a redevelopment process instead of initiating a new one. Yet, Vestbanen was not a location that proved suitable or worthy of engagement by the members of the Labour Party. In order to gain political consensus, Bjørvika was promoted as it represented a promising project that could prove beneficial to the eastern working class districts of Oslo, which thus led to its selection achieving a majority vote.

High investment in an opera house, a marginal cultural institution in the Norwegian context, had to be justified at the national scale to the Norwegian population at large. Its role in Oslo's development was a minor argument to this matter. Instead, the symbolic and aesthetic potential of architecture served this purpose, as the director of the opera house at the time revealed:

We agreed to make an associative enrichment, with an alliance with modern architecture, to make it accessible. We didn't want a South European monumentality, with stairs and pillars signalling that 'this is not for you; it is something for the upper classes'. So we managed to create 'broad monumentality', what I would call a Scandinavian, socio-democratic monumentality. It is not something exclusive.¹¹

The success of the Opera House rested upon its achievement as an edifice of national pride based on its architecture and public space, symbolising an aspect of the country's natural, national beauty, an iceberg sliding into the fjord. It is possible to climb up this edifice, with the roof offering a large public space with a view of the sea. The opera house, the director stresses, also became successful because it is an urban space, "an Italian piazza," where people gather and can walk on the roof.

¹¹ Bergsli, H. (2015). Urban attractiveness and competitive policies in Oslo and Marseille. The waterfront as object of restructuring, culture-led redevelopment and negotiation.

(citation page 144). Thesis submitted for the degree of philosophiae doctor, Institute of sociology and human geography, University of Oslo, Oslo.

The design proposed by Snøhetta to address the international competition's call for a beautiful, unique and monumental edifice included the choice of public space as an integral and vital part of the building. Snøhetta won the bid among 260, mainly international, architectural offices, and has won 24 prizes for its oeuvre (among which 21 are international prizes).¹² The opera house has provided Oslo's inhabitants with a distinctive public space, a new symbolic edifice of the capital city. In the end, it has served as driver for urban development in the eastern parts of Oslo.



The harbour promenade between the public library opening in 2020 and the Opera House. Photo: Bjørvika Utvikling/Vibeke Hermanrud.

The opera house is not the only cultural institution that has been relocated to Bjørvika. The Munch museum and the main city library are municipal institutions that have also been relocated in its vicinity. The latter represents the main offer aimed to attract a broader range of Oslo's inhabitants to Bjørvika by being universally accessible and free of charge. These three cultural arenas constitute public offers that complement the commercial ones, as do seven public spaces. This is because cultural arenas and public spaces are crucial to Bjørvika's quality design as they promote accessibility.

¹² Whist, E. Kalhagen, K.O. & E. Henningsen (2016). New Opera house. Evaluation, assigned by the Ministry of Finance, December 2016. Retrieved at

<https://www.ntnu.no/documents/1261860271/1262012574/Ettrevaluering+av+Nytt+Operahus.pdf/d12889f3-0aa2-47e4-b17e-5474aa909959?version=1.0>.

6. HOW ARE QUALITY PUBLIC SPACES DELIVERED IN BJØRVIKA?

Political regulations secured the location, development and funding of seven public spaces as well as a harbour promenade in Bjørvika, which Bjørvika Infrastructure is developing and will hand over - free of charge - to the municipality of Oslo, who will be responsible for their maintenance. Additionally, their quality has been assured by the analytical tools offered by public space programmes developed by architects and landscape architects.

In 2004, Oslo and Bjørvika Utvikling organised an open competition to suggest overarching concepts for diversity and coherence in and between the public spaces. The proposal put forward by SLA Landscape Architects and Gehl Architects was selected by the jury based on their aims of fostering city life through the delivery of high quality public spaces. The analytical tool that SLA and Gehl uses in the programmes made for the public spaces of Bjørvika is the principle that the terrain should *support* the desired activities. This approach puts city living first, implying that urban design should sustain the city, avoiding urban designs restricting the desired uses of public space.



The Akerselvaallmenningen public space. Photo: Eskild Johansen.

The analytical tool offered by the public space programmes to ensure the delivery of quality design has been supplemented by the guidance tools of theme reports for lighting, city space and streetscape, buildings, street furniture and equipment, art

and most importantly the Overarching Sustainability Programme. These reports substantiate the main topics targeted in the design handbook, their aim being to support and inspire the delivery of quality design by providing principles about the components on which quality design depends, without detailed instruction.

Several measures have been taken to ensure that the programmes guide decision-making on design quality, with the first being that the city council instructed the that development of guidelines should be in accordance with and complement the design handbook. The second has been Bjørvika Utvikling's implementation of environmental and design principles and their curation of cultural programming. The guidance tools have been pivotal to the delivery of high-quality public spaces in Bjørvika, due to their status as being politically motivated, their embeddedness in formal planning, and the financial security for delivery established in the agreement between the landowners and the municipality of Oslo. The challenge of these tools is to find ways to institutionalise them and to avoid their dependency on personal commitment. In Bjørvika, this seems to have been avoided by their integration in the project management model.

7. A SUCCESSFUL TOOLKIT USED IN BJØRVIKA

The public spaces delivered in Bjørvika are the result of how different tools are deliberately combined. First, the governance model formed in collaboration between Oslo's city council, planning authorities, and pseudo-public companies provides the financial security necessary to provide quality urban design. Second, the formal tool represented by the regulation plan secured democratic public space, thus accessibility to this otherwise exclusive area of high-cost housing and offices. Third, the planning authorities have utilised various steering tools that have inspired the developers and thereby increased their competencies. These tools are the explorative and analytical tools of scenario-building, debate and concept competition, tools that inform stakeholders about urban design quality and its value to the built environment. Guidance tools such as handbooks, programmes and theme reports are politically prescribed, yet funded and followed up by the development company. The agreement between the landowners has implied significant investment in public space, greenery, and materials.

The physical result of the successful toolkit is the continuous, voluminous and diversified range of public spaces that are connected to the area and that connect the area to its surroundings. The social result is the extensive use of the harbour promenade by Oslo's inhabitants and visitors, and the appropriation of Bjørvika's beach area, especially by Oslo's younger generations.

What is further interesting in the case of Bjørvika is how this combination of financial mechanisms and democratic awareness about the role of public spaces and public functions have grounded development and assured a quality place. *Initiating* the development of the area with the opening of a cultural institution – the Oslo Opera House – was a bold political move, albeit one that has proven to be a success. Ensuring the prevalence of several cultural arenas has added value to the accessibility and diverse use of Bjørvika by different social groups. It accommodates the vitality of the place and the diversity of city life that prevents this new area that is located between established neighbourhoods, the city centre and the Fjord from being an exclusive area.

One challenge to Bjørvika's overall success is that a range of public meetings, hearings and activities to inform about and promote the area among Oslo's inhabitants did not provide a wide base of public support for the vision of the Fjord city. Insufficient physical connections to existing eastern residential areas caused the neighbouring district council to develop an alternative plan for Bjørvika in 2008, prior to the adoption of the Fjord city plan by the Oslo city council. The lack of housing accessible to lower and medium income groups has further been a central critique of Bjørvika, and one that has not yet been fully addressed in terms of social diversity. Combining high quality design with affordable offers is a challenge in urban development that Bjørvika has hitherto not been properly able to meet, despite public ownership and governance. This is also why the extent and quality of public spaces is key to its overarching role to the city.

The innovative approach illustrated by this case is the networked governance model that secures a holistic approach to place development due to agreement regarding the delegation of financial responsibilities and deliverances. The quality of design, however, is assured by the combination of formal and informal quality delivery tools: first, the decisions of the city council adopted in the regulation plan of Bjørvika which assure a large share of public space and encourage its quality by instructing developers to provide guidance tools. Second, the planning authorities and Bjørvika Utvikling have instilled competencies among the stakeholders through the continuous provision of additional guidelines, workshops with professionals, and arenas for debate, as illustrated in this paper in the cases of the scenario building and the cultural programme. Consequently, the highly complex development process

has been accommodated by a solid toolkit by which the quality of design in Bjørvika has been secured through the inclusion of design competencies.

The vision of Oslo has transformed from an industrial city into a green and recreational city through the evolvement of the Fjord city project. The extensive development of public space has made it accessible and allowed it to be appropriated by Oslo's inhabitants. The project has ultimately consolidated the shared perspective that design quality and public space development serve economic, social and cultural purposes, on which investment in the city depends today.

KEY ONLINE RESOURCES

<https://www.bjorvikautvikling.no/portfolio-item/information-in-english/>

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United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)

P.O. Box 30030 00100 Nairobi GPO KENYA
www.unhabitat.org

URBAN MAESTRO

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Principal authors: Heidi Bergsli, Researcher at Norwegin
Institute of Urban and Regional Research

Design and layout: Kidnap Your Designer, Brussels
Bouwmeester Maître Architecte (BMA)

