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**FROM SCARCITY TO ABUNDANCE:**

**SOCIAL HOUSING IN OSLO FROM 1945 - 1980**

Barbara Elisabeth Ascher

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### SOCIAL HOUSING IN OSLO FROM 1945-1980

A Working Paper for SCIBE  
Barbara Elisabeth Ascher

It is a widely held belief that there is a direct relation between the amount of resources available and the nature and quality of state sponsored programs, such as the provision of social housing. In this paper the author will argue that this is not necessarily the case, and that the hierarchy of priorities, which the state adopts is a more determining factor than the availability of resources. The author will argue this point using the state sponsored housing program in Oslo in the period between the end of the Second World War and the economic boom of the 1980s.

### SOCIAL HOUSING POLICIES IN POST-WAR NORWAY

Challenged by the destructions of the Second World War, the Norwegian government and municipalities engaged heavily into housing production as part of their reconstruction programs. In Oslo a series of satellite or dormitory towns were established along especially built railway lines. These new settlements were part of the governmental housing policy of "sosial boligpolitikk" (*social housing policy*) and were based on the notion of creating healthy modern neighbourhoods with a variety of public facilities surrounded by spacious green areas (N.-O. Lund, 1988). Lambertseter is the

earliest example of the urban developments that were built under conditions of very limited resources (Brochmann, 1958; Spjudvik, 2007). But many other settlements followed. In the early years and until 1960 a total amount of 45.000 housing units had been built mostly on the eastern and south-eastern outskirts of the city (B. H. Lund, 2000).

Looking back in history the reasons for these efforts are likely to be found in the emerging social-democratic welfare state ideals. Social-democratic thinking influenced decision-makers', planners' and architects' ideals about the modern society. In this ideology housing was defined as a social right that should be available to all citizens (Sørvoll, 2011).

The foundation of "Husbanken", the State Housing Bank, as an instrument to finance social housing, bears witness to this. The State Housing Bank guaranteed the desired universal access to housing by granting loans to all citizens and housing associations that were willing to accept their conditions. The conditions included, for instance, requirements of minimum standards as well as restrictions on maximum standards such as materials and living areas. By 1980 more than 80% of the post-war housing stock in Norway had been financed by the State Housing Bank (Reiersen, Thue, & Jensen, 1996).

Municipalities like Oslo supported social housing by providing access to building plots as well as subsidies to housing co-operatives like OBOS, the Oslo Housing and Savings Association. During the early years following the Second World War and the heydays of social housing in the 60s, the budget of Oslo dedicated to housing remained more or less stable in terms of percentage of the total municipal budget. These subsidies were later significantly reduced from the 70s on, illustrating the shift from a universal approach to housing provisions towards a policy that aimed at selective groups, such as old or disabled people who had difficulties in competing in the housing market (Annaniassen & Bengtsson, 2006; B. H. Lund, 2000; Reiersen et al., 1996).

The double role of the State Housing Bank as a national institution that both financed and ensured the quality of dwellings is remarkable. Especially in the early years when the need for a definition of standards for architectural quality fuelled the discussion about what were considered appropriate housing standards. The ambition was to build the best homes within the given financial limitations, and the continuous improvement of designs and processes was considered a collective task that involved architects, planners politicians and the public (Hansen & Guttu, 2000).

In Norway, a traditional home-owner society, the ideal of “owning one’s own house” was merged with a more collective approach. Large-scale social housing was mostly organized as housing-cooperatives. In Norwegian housing cooperatives members would either have occupancy rights of a dwelling, or be waiting to gain those rights as members of the same organization. This solidarity was especially evident in the early years when part of the construction process was carried out as “dugnad”, collective voluntary community work (Annaniassen, 1991).

## **WITHIN THE LIMITS OF SCARCITY**

An example of such post-war developments is Lambertseter. This new housing area south east of central Oslo was built by the Oslo Housing and Savings Association as part of the state program for housing called “roof over our heads”. The layout was based on a master-plan by the Norwegian architect Frode Rinnan, well known as the “House Architect of the Labour party” and author of the plan for the 1952 Oslo Olympics. His scheme for the area was inspired by both the German tradition of urban planning as well as the English garden city movement (Spjudvik, 2007). As a result 3300 housing units, most of them three or four storeys housing blocks were grouped in 14 neighbourhoods. The majority of apartments consisted of two bedrooms, a kitchen, a bathroom and a storage room. The architecture was intentionally kept modest, but represented a significant raise of standards

compared to the overcrowded, badly insulated, lacking bathroom and warm water flats of inner-city of Oslo at that time (Bjørnsen & Kronborg, 2009).

The minimal dimensions of the apartments required both functional apartment layouts as well as smart furniture solutions. This led to an active promotion in interior exhibitions and publications of modern design furniture that was flexible, multifunctional and inexpensive (Reiersen et al., 1996).

Compared to the existing housing stock, the new apartments were designed with a focus on a modern life style of a nuclear family. The kitchen, for instance, was often facing outdoor playgrounds, so the housewife could keep an eye on her offspring while cooking. Social life evolved around shops, collective functions such as shared laundry facilities, and a variety of sports facilities. Lambertseter housed 18.000 people in its heydays and is still a popular living area for 10.000 inhabitants (Spjudvik, 2007). The drop in population is impressive and sure sign of rising space standards, which are indicative of higher disposable income.

Although the architecture of Lambertseter and other early projects of publicly subsidized housing were simple in their architecture and built out of lightweight concrete with plain rendered facades, the obvious raise of building standard influenced the public housing discourse. The perceived “luxury” of this social housing fuelled an on-going scarcity debate about housing standards and innovative and efficient use of building materials (Kvarv, 2003).

The housing issue was publicly debated in the major Norwegian newspapers with engineer and contractor Olav Selvaag as one of its leading figures (Hasselknippe & Selvaag, 1982). His main argument on austerity is based on the distribution of investments in housing regarding the cost per unit. He warns that in conditions of limited resources aiming at too high standards risks not being able to fulfill the housing needs of all the people.. His moral is summarized in a renown quote: “*Disponer alt I underkant av det*

*teoretisk mulige*” (“Distribute means more minimally than the theoretically possible”) from his “Bygg rasjonelt” (*Built Rationally*) book from 1951 (Selvaag, 1951, p. 17).

In his calculations he came up with a maximum amount of money that theoretically should be spent per home. He suggested major changes in building construction and production methods, some of them significantly challenging the existing technical standards, in order to keep costs within the budget (Selvaag, 1951).

The debate about lowering housing standards culminated when he was challenged to build a prototype of his proposed detached house, which was built on reduced foundations and made out of an insulated balloon frame constructions with Rockwool insulated outer walls (Skeie, 1998).

Although the house proved to be structurally sound, warm and spacious, it was considered sub-standard and only suitable for temporary dwelling. Selvaag was highly criticized by the building authorities, the Oslo Housing and Savings association and others that defended the ideals of social-democracy regarding neighbourhoods that consisted of affordable homes of a what was considered a “decent” standard. Although Selvaag almost got expelled from the Norwegian association of engineers for his suggestion of new technical solutions, he remained one of the most influential figures in the housing debate in Norway (Hasselknippe & Selvaag, 1982). Especially his contributions to the development of efficient production methods in the building industry made his company a successful player on the housing market (Skeie, 1998).

## FIGHTING SCARCITY WITH EFFICIENCY

The example of Ammerud illustrates the influence of other technical innovations and demand for efficiency in the building industry. Prefabrication of concrete elements, that were pieced together at site made it possible to produce housing in what was considered a fast and cheap manner and in large numbers (Kronborg, 2003). This was supposed to be the case, however it was later proved that high-rise building was more expensive than low rise and the only economy was on land acquisition.

The dormitory town of Ammerud in Groruddalen is often used as the example for the Oslo region for this era. The architecture was designed by the Norwegian architect Håkon Mjelva, a member of the progressive architecture group PAGON, that had been strongly influenced by the international tendencies of iconic large-scale housing projects. His designs for the area of Ammerud consisted of terraced houses contrasting high-rise blocks and low-rises, some of them in long line. Although a train station was opened in 1966, most of the planning in the area paid tribute to the emerging car-culture of that time (Kronborg, 2003).

Altogether 246 housing units in low-rise blocks, 236 homes in atrium-houses and 1245 apartments in high-rise blocks were built. The neighbourhood of Ammerudlia being the biggest ever housing project built in Norway with 984 units located in 4 high-rise buildings with up to 13 storeys (Tvedt, Johansen, Reisegg, Bryhn, & Olsen, 2010).

The way new housing projects were designed and built became more and more subject to critique. The Ammerud report by Thorbjørn Hansen and Anne Sæterdal from 1969, describing the problems of the large-scale housing projects with a lack of public facilities and difficult access to work places, started a critical discussion on how social housing had to be changed to fulfil the needs of users (Hansen & Sæterdal, 1970).

The State Housing Bank took up the discussion starting to use its influence by refusing loans to large-scale high-rise housing projects, which

did not focus on the living conditions of its inhabitants (Hansen & Guttu, 2000; Reiersen et al., 1996).

The absence of discussions about user needs in the earlier processes is indeed striking and could be explained by the self-appointed role of the modern movement, which was to educate the user how to dwell rather than respond to the way users appropriate their dwelling spaces.

## **REDEFINING LIMITED RESOURCES**

The third example of the satellite town of Romsås in the outskirts East of Oslo is in some way to be seen as a reaction to the Ammerud case and its criticisms in the Ammerud Report. The municipality as the owner of the land, the Oslo Housing and Savings Association as the developer and a group of architects joined forces in 1968 on an organizational and financial level in order to build a new neighbourhoods that would improve on what was conceived as failed examples of earlier dormitory towns (Bjørnsen & Kronborg, 2009).

The project consisted of six different neighbourhoods, altogether 2600 apartments in three to eight story concrete blocks. Public and Service Facilities such as nursing homes, schools, kindergartens, and libraries were considered an essential part of this scheme and were delivered simultaneously to the dwellings. The spatial concept is based on the sloping topography giving emphasis to the closeness to nature, with spacious green forests separating the neighbourhoods. The main access to the area was via a central railway station or via parking garages along a ring road. This supported the main intention to keep the housing areas car-free (Bjørnsen & Kronborg, 2009).

This project is considered the most complete of the housing schemes that has been developed in the outskirts of Oslo, although some of the areas were intentionally kept unbuilt to give room for later modifications. Romsås

was the last big housing scheme that met the governmental policy that housing expenses per household should not exceed 20% of an average industrial workers income (Martens, 1982).

### PROSPERITY AND SOCIAL HOUSING IN NORWAY

Following the discovery of the North Sea Oil in 1967, income per capita in Norway increased tremendously. The country went from being an average European economy to becoming one of the richest countries in the world.

Although the availability of resources would have put the government in a favourable position to invest into state sponsored housing programs, the contrary happened. The idea of housing changed from being considered a right to becoming more and more a commodity to be traded in the free market and thus considered a private affair (Sørvoll, 2009).

The State Housing Bank started to change their criteria and begun targeting selective groups which had difficulties in competing in the private housing market. Many other steps, such deregulating the financial market, abolishing price regulations for rent, and abolishing restriction of the sale of apartments within housing cooperatives, followed. The municipal budgets for housing decreased significantly and public social housing programs came to a halt (Bjørnsen & Kronborg, 2009; Hansen & Guttu, 2000; B. H. Lund, 2000; Reiersen et al., 1996; Sørvoll, 2009).

In this period The Labour Party abandoned one of their principal ideals: that social housing is one of the pillars of a welfare state and that the main political aim is to limit speculation and the influence of private capital in the housing sector. This resulted in a paradigm shift transforming a universal approach to housing into amore means-tested system directed at those that could not compete in the private housing market (Ruonavaara, 2008; Sørvoll, 2011).

Providers of affordable housing, like OBOS, became one of many competitors on the private market competing over land, building costs and consumers. OBOS- projects like Holmlia that were planned before the retrenchment and carried out and sold on the private market afterwards were redesigned to match market conditions (Bjørnsen & Kronborg, 2009). Higher densities, more flats, less spacious green areas and increased focus on individual demands such as parking, could be seen as a result of this orientations towards the demands of individual house buyers (Martens, 1982).

It was commonly argued that the most extreme housing shortages were solved, and that most of the people were perfectly capable to provide for themselves under market conditions (Sørvoll, 2011). Governmental investments into social housing were thus regarded as superfluous. With housing completely left to the mechanisms of an unregulated private market, housing prices raised significantly, although building costs remained more or less stable. The ambition of earlier governments to keep spending on housing for private households to less than 20% of their income proved to be out-dated. The current rate has reached 34% and is still rising.

Although the overheated housing market crashed 1987 and created new shortages of affordable housing for those who lost their home due to foreclosure, the Norwegian government remained steadfast in following the neo-liberal tendencies of its north European and Scandinavian neighbour's housing policies (Ruonavaara, 2008). Social housing expenditure in terms of large-scale governmental investment into housing has been replaced by mortgage reduction on taxes for homeowners. I would state, that social housing as a state sponsored program was terminated at this point in Norway.

Quality of housing is hard to measure and both the 'social' in social housing and the 'affordability' in affordable housing hard to define. But from

my perspective of the Norwegian cases, it is hard to prove that there is a direct relationship between the availability of resources and the ambitions behind a state programme such as social housing.

It seems likely, that priorities that have been set by political agendas be these 'social democratic' or 'neo-liberal' free market. It is these priorities, which have influenced the outcomes of social housing provisions in Oslo and shaped the built environment of these areas. Factors such as the optimism of the architect and availability of land in Lambertseter, the enthusiasm about new production methods as in Ammerud or learning effects from earlier experiences may have had a significant influence on the outcomes of social housing schemes, but these seem independent from the availability of resources, but rather due to a capability to engage both on individual and collective levels.



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