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Oslo, 1 June 2015

PROPOSED INTERNATIONAL ALERT: Threat of demolition of the Y-block of the Government Quarter in Oslo, Norway, damaged in the bombing of 22 July 2011.



Birds eye view of the area

Executive Summary

The Government Quarter was one of two sites subject to the terror attacks of 22 July 2011 in and outside Oslo, the capital of Norway. A bomb explosion in the precinct killed eight people and injured many others. Several buildings suffered serious damage, including the H-block and the Y-block, two monumental buildings located in the Government Quarter at the centre of Oslo, that has housed government offices since 1814.

We understand with concern that in May 2014 The Norwegian Government decided to co-locate almost all the various ministries on the site of the Government Quarter, a decision based on concerns for security and efficiency. Implicit in that decision and the future planning process was preservation of the damaged H-block and demolition of the Y-block, which is also reflected in the new governmental zoning plan for the precinct and the six parallel feasibility studies for the new Government Quarter.

<https://www.regjeringen.no/nb/aktuelt/utstilling-om-nytt-regjeringskvartal/id2405825/>

<https://www.regjeringen.no/nb/tema/plan-bygg-og-eiendom/regjeringskvartalet/id669703/>

Not only is the Y-block a building with great architectural and artistic values in its own right, it is also an integrated part of the Government Quarter. The demolition of the Y-block will greatly lessen the cultural value of the remaining H-block and the precinct. National experts in the fields of culture, arts and architecture state that by this decision, essential cultural values are disregarded for reasons of security and optimal exploitation of the site.

The intimate and inseparable integration of architecture and artistic decoration make these government offices from 1958 and 1969 in Oslo, a modernistic masterpiece not only in a Norwegian, but also in an international context. Here, Pablo Picasso ventured on his first experiments with the active integration of creative arts and architecture. His cooperation with the Norwegian artist Carl Nesjar, who physically sand blasted Picasso's decorations on the government buildings in Oslo, was also the starting point for Picasso's work with monumental public decorations in New York, Paris, Barcelona, Stockholm and Jerusalem.

When the precinct planning process started in 2013, The Ministry of the Environment gave the Directorate for Cultural Heritage the mandate to make a report with updated assessments on protection value and new use of these two modernistic buildings and the rest of the Government

Quarter. This IHA (International Heritage Alert) is based on the assessment made by the Directorate in October 2013, “*Riksantikvarens utredning om verneverdi og ny bruk*”.

(available at:

<http://www0.ra.no/Aktuelt/Nyheter/Nyhetsarkiv/2013/Anbefaler-bevaring-av-Hoeyblokka>). The report concludes:

The main construction and artwork of the H-block and the Y-block were not damaged by the terror attack. The cultural heritage, architectural and artistic values in the complex have not been undermined. The Directorate for Cultural Heritage recommends preservation.

ICOMOS Norway supported the conclusions of the Directorate for Cultural Heritage in its statement to the Directorate for Cultural Heritage, dated 2 October 2013. (Appendix 1)

Having reviewed the available technical reports, ICOMOS Norway has advised that no convincing arguments confirm that demolition is the only means to attain a secure and functional workplace. Preliminary reports from consultants assert that both structures may be usefully integrated in the envisaged new layouts – if the Norwegian government is willing.

As international experts in the field of modern heritage, the ISC20C urges further consideration of this matter by the Norwegian Government.

1-0 Identity of Building/Place

1-1 Current name and original name

Government Quarter of Norway, Oslo (H-block and Y-block).

1-2 Location

Oslo, Norway, Akersgata 42–44.

1-3 Classification/ Type of place

Two office government office buildings, the H-block and the Y-block.

1-4 Current Heritage Protection Status

Listed by the Cultural Heritage Office of Oslo, advised to be protected by the Heritage Act by the Directorate for Cultural Heritage in Norway.

2-0 Statement of Significance and History

2-1 Statement of Significance

ICOMOS Norway considers the Government Quarter of Norway in Oslo, consisting of the H-block from 1958 and the Y-block from 1969, to be the

most important monumental expressions of the breakthrough of modernism in Norway, within both architecture and the pictorial arts. The two buildings, designed by Erling Viksjø, are Norway's most important symbols of post-World War II optimism and belief in international democracy, dialogue and openness, as also reflected in the artistic contributions of Pablo Picasso. This belief was given an international perspective in the fact that an artist such as Pablo Picasso was invited and was himself inspired by Viksjø's project. Viksjø's government buildings symbolise Norway's democratic and optimistic community with the rest of the world in the post-World War II reconstruction and the building of institutions for community and democracy. The fact that they survived the terror actions of 22 July 2011 strengthens their historical significance.

The architect Erling Viksjø played a key role in developing the modernistic architectural language in Norway, where form, function, symbols, materials and decoration were to go hand in hand. He was a pioneer in researching the aesthetic qualities of natural concrete, a technique that inspired concrete work all over the world. The concrete is saturated with river pebbles and other stone materials of different colours, textures and qualities, to be sand blasted so that the natural materials were exposed as the aesthetic expression of the facade. Related use of natural concrete that architect Viksjø and engineer Sverre Jystad developed together during the 1950s has since been used in monumental buildings throughout the world. ICOMOS Norway wishes to stress the international importance of Viksjø and Jystad's technical and aesthetical experiments with the use of sand blasted natural concrete.¹

Concerning the H-block, the Directorate for Cultural Heritage's study on the protection value and new use of the buildings emphasises the following:

The H-block is one of the foremost signature buildings for the modern Norwegian welfare state in the postwar era. It exemplifies an era, even as it is itself unique. There are no other buildings that can replace it. The H-block is one of the prime examples of monumental modernism in the history of Norwegian architecture. The cultural heritage, architectural and artistic values inherent in the H-block are so great that each one of these values would in themselves justify preservation. (p. 3)

As for the Y-block, the study finds that

the Y-block is internationally significant by virtue of Picasso's integrated works of art. The building relates deliberately to the H-block and the Government Park. The decoration facing Akersgata is one of few monumental works of art in the public space in Norway.

With its organic form, low height and exquisite usage of materials, the Y-block also contains significant cultural heritage, architectural and artistic values. (p. 3)

The overall conclusion is as follows:

By demolishing the Government Quarter, with its obvious cultural heritage, architectural and artistic values, one runs the risk of making a mistake that will be censured by future generations. The Directorate for Cultural Heritage believes that any demolition of the H-block and the Y-block will seem incomprehensible a few years from now. (p. 13)

2-2 *History of place*

The Government Quarter is centrally placed in Oslo, next to Norway's first government building from 1891, the Supreme Court from 1903, Oslo's main library from 1933, the Trinity Church from 1858, the central police station and court house from 1866 (now in government use), and close by the Parliament building (Storting) from 1866. The architect Erling Viksjø planned a set of buildings, of which two were realised according to the original plan: the H-block and the Y-block. They replaced early 19th-century military hospital buildings, which were raised later at another historic site in Oslo. The Government Quarter is placed between two major entrance roads to the older city. The grouping of official buildings in this area started in the mid-19th century, continuing up to the latest government buildings of the 1990s.

2-3 *Date of project/ Date of construction/ Finishing of work*

The project for Government offices was first presented in 1939, but changed and was finally realised by Viksjø as the H-block 1958–1959 and the Y-block 1969.

2-4 *Architect/Designers/Artists*

H-block: Architect: Erling Viksjø. Artists: Pablo Picasso / Kai Fjell/ Tore Haaland/ Carl Nesjar/ Inger Sitter / Odd Tandberg.

Y-block: Architect: Erling Viksjø. Artist: Pablo Picasso

2-5 *Architect/Designers*

All are Norwegian, except Picasso: Erling Viksjø 1910–1971 / Pablo Picasso 1881–1973 / Kai Fjell 1907–1989 / Tore Haaland 1918–2006 / Carl Nesjar b. 1920 / Inger Sitter 1929–2015 / Odd Tandberg b. 1924.

2-6 *Original and current use of building/place*

Previously in everyday use as government offices and offices for the Prime Minister of Norway. The two Viksjø buildings (H-block and Y-block), are currently out of use because of bomb damage sustained 22 July 2011.

2-7 Changes, additions

Addition to the H-block: two top floors (Erling Viksjø Arkitektkontor 1990).
No changes or additions to the Y-block.

2-8 Current condition and use

Both H-block and Y-block: Bombed 22 July 2011. Structurally intact.
Temporarily open to visitors in 2013 / 2014. The Directorate for Cultural Heritage's study states the following:

Use

It is fully possible to combine new use of the H-block and the Y-block with preservation. The buildings can be used as safe, well-functioning, area-efficient and modern offices.

- *A high degree of security can be achieved, as detailed in the assessments of the concept selection study.*
- *Universal accessibility can be achieved.*
- *Good fire safety and good evacuation routes can be achieved.*

Economics

It is probable that it would be economically advantageous to preserve the H-block and the Y-block rather than demolishing them and building anew. The concept selection study's calculations of the respective costs of building anew versus preservation are highly questionable. The Directorate for Cultural Heritage recommends that the economic calculations are done over again.

- *The costs of dismantling the works of art will be substantially higher than stated in the concept selection study.*
- *The costs of administration, operation and maintenance will not be higher for the H-block and the Y-block than for new buildings.*

Environment

Climate change is among our most serious environmental challenges.

- *It is fully possible to achieve a level of energy efficiency corresponding to a passive house, something that equals energy label B. This corresponds to the targets set for the new buildings in the concept selection study and meets the requirements that are anticipated to be in effect from 2015.*
- *Compared with demolition and new construction, preservation entails less greenhouse gas emission.*
- *Rehabilitation will entail less consumption of resources and less waste. (p. 4)*

In conclusion:

The Directorate for Cultural Heritage has demonstrated that preservation will entail substantially lower costs than is presumed in the concept selection study. We contend that this entails, with great probability, that the preservation alternative will cost less than demolition and new construction. We recommend that the economic calculations are done again on the basis of more detailed knowledge about the scope of preservation, the state of the buildings' constructions and the possible solutions as shown in for example appendix 8. The concept selection study's conclusions have been drawn on too uncertain a basis to give weight to the commission's economic conclusions. (p. 45)

2-9 *Original design intent and use*

Offices and representative areas for the Norwegian Government.

3-0 Description (history and technology)

3-1 *Physical description*

H-block: Corbusier-inspired high-rise of 17 floors above ground level in concrete and steel construction. The ground floor is recessed, exposing the bearing columns. The concrete is saturated with rounded river pebbles, then sand blasted to create a natural finish. Architect Erling Viksjø and the engineer Sverre Jystad experimented during the 1950's with concrete surfaces in order to achieve an ornamented surface with colour and texture. (see Jystad 1959, Nesjar 1959, Viksjø 1951 and 1959, Solbakken 2010). The sand blasted natural concrete became the hallmark of Viksjø, and was widely used since, also by other architects. Artworks were directly sand blasted onto the concrete surface and are an integral part of the building, both on the short ends of the exterior facade and in the main interior spaces. These extraordinary artworks were created in close relationship between the architect and the artists. (See Nesjar 1959)

Y-block: Four-storey Y-shaped building which embraces one side of the high H-block. The facades are rounded, in the same sand blasted natural concrete finish as the H-block, and the short ends of the exterior and the entrance hall are decorated by Pablo Picasso.

3-2 *Construction system used*

Steel- and concrete-saturated grid with rounded river pebbles. The window frames and front panelling recessed from the grid are of wood.

3-3 *Physical context/setting*

The H-block and Y-block are set together, forming a closed public square, where the ground paving is composed of different shades of grey-coloured granite forming a delicate pattern. A linden alley remaining from an early 19th-century military hospital is preserved in front of the main facade (the

hospital itself was relocated before the building process began). The square designed by Lunde & Løvseth Architects opened in 1996 (competition 1990).

3-4 Social and cultural context and value

The H-block and Y-block symbolise together Norway's democratic and optimistic community with the rest of the world in the post-World War II reconstruction and building of institutions for community and democracy. The fact that the H-block and Y-block survived the terror action of 22 July 2011 strengthens their historical significance.

3-5 Materials/fabric/form/function

Concrete shell, wooden window frames, wooden panel finishing in wood.

3-6 Aesthetic value

The intimate and inseparable integration of architecture and artistic decoration make the H-block and Y-block in Oslo a modernistic masterpiece not only in a Norwegian, but also in an international context. Here, Pablo Picasso ventured on his first experiments with the active integration of creative arts and architecture. His cooperation with the Norwegian artist Carl Nesjar, who physically sand blasted his decorations, was also the beginning of Picasso's work with monumental public decorations in New York, Paris, Barcelona, Stockholm and Jerusalem.

4-0 Source of Alert

4.1 Proposers of Heritage Alert, contact details:

ICOMOS Norway (post@icomos.no)

20th-Century Heritage Committee Norway, Olaf Steen
(olaf.steen@me.com)

ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Twentieth Century Heritage, Gunny Harboe (Gunny@harboearch.com)

4.2 Groups supporting Heritage Alert:

Directorate for Cultural Heritage in Norway, (postmottak@ra.no);

Docomomo Norge (docomomo@docomomo.no);

Norwegian Architects' Society (nal@arkitektur.no);

Society for the preservation of Ancient Norwegian Monuments

post@fortidsminneforeningen.no;

Norsk design- og arkitektursenter post@dogo.no.

4.3 Groups potentially against Heritage Alert action: Government of Norway.

4-4 Local, Regional, International significance citations about the place.

Report of the Directorate for Cultural Heritage, with citations (<http://www0.ra.no/Aktuelt/Nyheter/Nyhetsarkiv/2013/Anbefaler-bevaring-av-Hoeyblokka>).

4-5 *Letters of support for Heritage Alert action, newspaper articles, etc.*
There is a lively public debate, where the majority of articles support the preservation and re-use of the buildings in question. There are newspaper articles every week, as well as a recent biography of the building: Hugo Lauritz Jenssen, *Høyblokken. En bygningsbiografi* (Oslo: Press, 2013).

4-6 *Publications that describe the work/place, bibliography, etc.*
Exhibition:

The National Museum – Architecture. *Picasso – Oslo. Art and Architecture in the Government Buildings*. 20 June–6 October 2013.

Key publications (in Norwegian):

Brochmann, Odd, et al. "Konkurransen om ny regjeringsbygning i Oslo." *Byggekunst* 5/1940.

Butenschøn, Peter. "Statens ansikt. Regjeringsbygningen i Oslo som nasjonalarkitektur i seks akter." *Byggekunst* 5/1984.

Ellingsen, Beate, and Peter Butenschøn. "Regjeringsbygget (påbygget)." *Byggekunst* 5–6/1990.

Gabrielsen, Egil. "Sandblåst "Naturbetong". *Havekunst* 1/1960 p. 10-11.

Holm, Arne E. "Dekorasjonene i regjeringsbygget." *Byggekunst* 1/1959.

Hovdenakk, Per, Carl Nesjar et al. *Picasso besøker Norge*. Oslo: Grøndahl Dreyer, 1992.

Henjum, Berit Johanne. "Erling Viksjøs rådhusutkast i Bergen 1951–1953. Sett i en monografisk og typologisk sammenheng." Master's thesis in art history, University of Oslo, 2008.

Henjum, Berit Johanne. "Det beste jeg noen gang har laget". Erling Viksjøs rådhusutkast i Bergen ((1951-53), in Johnsen, Espen (ed.) *Brytninger. Norsk arkitektur 1945–65*. Oslo: Nasjonalmuseet for kunst, 2010, p. 106-115. English summary p. 288.

Jørgensen, Karsten. "Abstrakte landskap. Grindaker og Gabrielsens fornyelse av norsk hagearkitektur", in Johnsen, Espen (ed.) *Brytninger. Norsk arkitektur 1945–65*. Oslo: Nasjonalmuseet for kunst, 2010, p. 206-215. English summary p. 292-293.

Jystad, Sverre. "En ny betongteknikk." *Byggekunst* 1/1959 p.17.

"Konkurransen om ny regjeringsbygning i Oslo." *Byggekunst* 1/1940.

Nesjar, Carl. "Kunst i betong." *Byggekunst* 1/1959 p.19-21.

Norberg-Schulz, Christian. "Mot en ny syntese – Erling Viksjøs regjeringsbygning." *Bonytt* 3/1959.

Rølfsen, Erik. "Bygg for regjeringskontorer". *Byggekunst* 1/1959 p. 6-16.

Solbakken, Bente Aass. "Tekstur som ornament. Erling Viksjøs eksperimenter med sandblåst betong på 1950-tallet", in Johnsen, Espen (ed.) *Brytninger. Norsk arkitektur 1945–65*. Oslo:

Nasjonalmuseet for kunst, 2010, p. 260–271. English summary p. 295.

Tandberg Meggison, Trine. “Odd Tandberg. Prosess og struktur. Integreerte utsmykninger av Odd Tandberg 1959–1973.” Master’s thesis in art history, University of Oslo, 2009.

Tostrup, Elisabeth. “Høye idealer på kronglete tomt. Konkurransen om ny regjeringsbygning i 1939–40.” *Arkitekturårboka* 2012 (Oslo: Pax, 2012).

Trohaug, Hallvard. *Arkitekt Erling Viksjø*. Oslo: Norsk Arkitekturmuseum, 1999.

Erling Viksjø. “Fasadebetong”, *Byggekunst* 3/1951 p. 58-60.

Viksjø, Erling. “Det nye regjeringsbygget.” *Byggekunst* 1/1959 p. 2-5.

Viksjø, Per, and Erling Viksjø. “Y-blokken Regjeringskvartalet.” *Byggekunst* 1/1970.

4-7 *Time constraints for advocacy*

Immediate action.

In May 2014 The Norwegian Government decided to co-locate a major part of the various ministries on the site of the Government Quarter. Implicit in the planning process was preservation of the damaged *H-block* and demolition of the *Y-block*. Demolition is therefore a premise for the new governmental zoning plan under development, and for the six ongoing parallel feasibility studies for a new collocated Government Quarter on the site affected by the bomb attack. The new Government Quarter will be finished 2023–25. Exact date for the demolition of the Y-block is not fixed. This alert demonstrates international interest and deep concern for the future of this significant complex.

As international experts in twentieth Century Heritage monuments and sites we therefore propose to issue an international Heritage Alert before a new zoning plan is adopted next year, with the intention of drawing media attention to international concerns about this decision of the Government of Norway, assisting public understanding of the heritage significance of this place, and seeking the reconsideration of the proposed demolition of the Y-block by the highest Norwegian authorities.

5-0 Recommended action

5-1 *Heritage Alert: distribution* via ICOMOS ISC20C, ICOMOS Norway

5-2 *Letters to:*

The Prime Minister of Norway, Ms Erna Solberg, P.O. Box 8001 Dep, NO-0030 Oslo, Norway. (postmottak@smk.dep.no)

The Minister of Government Administration, Mr Jan Tore Sanner, P.O. Box 8004 Dep, NO-0030 Oslo, Norway. (postmottak@kmd.dep.no)

The Minister of the Environment, Ms Tine Sundtoft, P.O. Box 8013 Dep, NO-0030 Oslo, Norway. (postmottak@kld.dep.no)

5-3 *Media release:* Attached

5.4 *ICOMOS website upload:* International ICOMOS, Norway ICOMOS, ISC20C.

6-0 Desired outcome: *Stopping demolition of the Y-block.*

Negotiations with the Norwegian Government to achieve a better solution, that does not involve demolition but rather integration of the Y-block in the future Government Quarter of Oslo.

There is already media attention to the matter, further international media attention is desirable.

The public opinion in Norway is divided, with strong feelings involved. A deeper public understanding of the international significance involved and threat to international heritage values by a demolition.

Proposed by:


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President ICOMOS Norway





Olaf Steen
The 20th Century Heritage
Committee, ICOMOS Norway

Endorsed by



Sheridan Burke
President ICOMOS ISC20C



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Photos and illustrations:



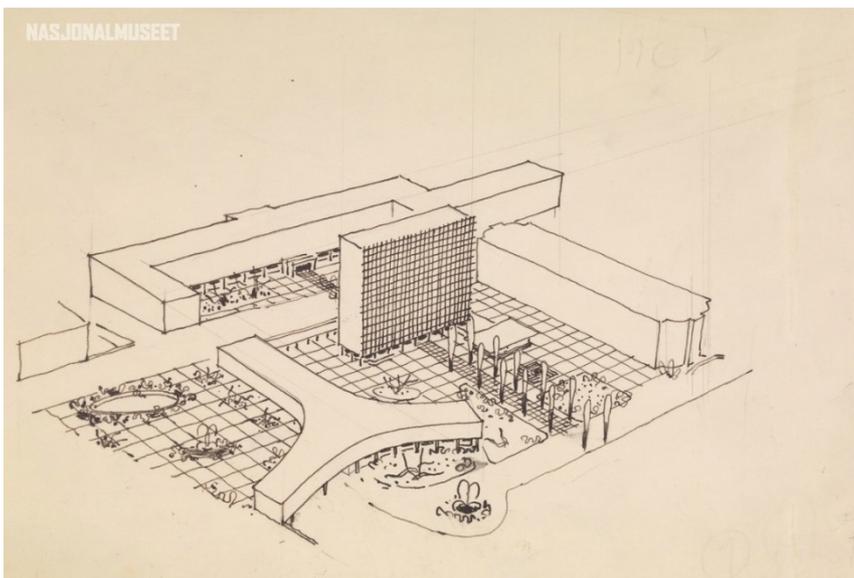
Erling Viksjø: H-block and Y-block, Photo: Teigens Fotoatelier, 1969-1972. Copy right: Dextra Photo.



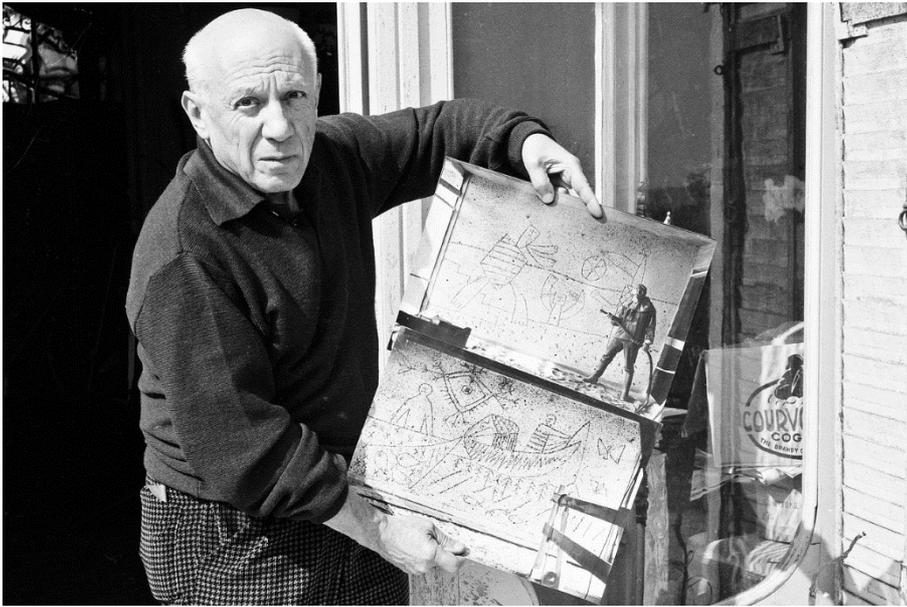
Erling Viksjø: Y-block and H-block. End wall decoration by Pablo Picasso, Photo: Teigens Fotoatelier, 1969-1972. Copyright: Dextra Photo.



*Erling Viksjø: H-block and Y-block, Photo: Teigens Fotoatelier, 1969-1972.
Copyright: Dextra Photo.*



*Erling Viksjø, sketch, The Government Quarter 1957-58, The National Museum,
of Art, Architecture and Design, Architecture collections. Photo: Andreas Harvik.
Copyright: The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design.*



Pablo Picasso, Work in progress, Photo: Carl Nesjar, 1958-60. The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Architecture collections. Copyright: The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design.



Erling Viksjø: Y-Block, interior, ca. 1970. Photo: Bjørn Winsnes, The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Architecture collections. Decoration by Pablo Picasso. Copyright: The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design.



H-block just after the bombing, 22.07.2011

Photo: Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation



Just after the bombing, 22.07.2011

Photo: Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation



Y-block and H-block, 2014, photo: Olaf Steen, ICOMOS Norway



Y-block, 2014, photo: Olaf Steen, ICOMOS Norway

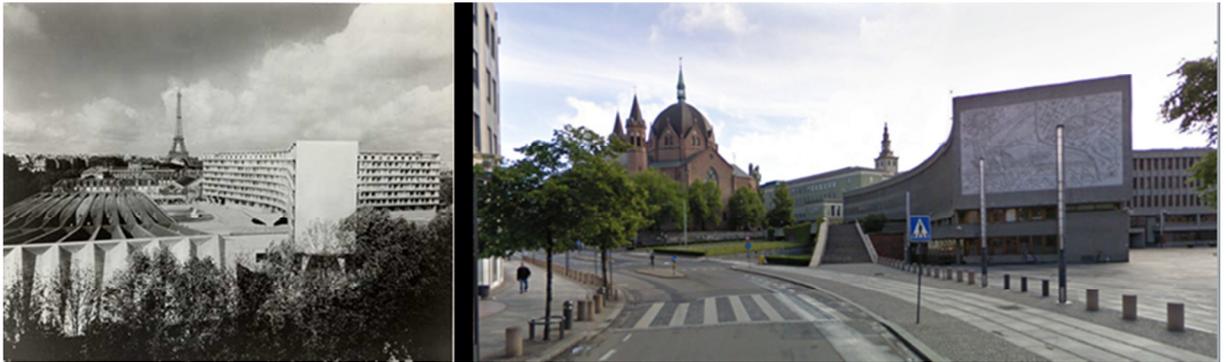


H-block and Y-block, 2014, photo: Olaf Steen, ICOMOS Norway

International parallels:



Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer, UN Headquarter, New York



UNESCO headquarter, Paris and Y-block, Oslo



*Marcel Breuer, Pier Luigi Nervi, Bernard Zehrfus:
Unesco Headquarters, Paris, 1952-58*

ⁱ Viksjø was attracted to the contemporary trend of using exposed concrete. However, he found the aesthetic expressions of already existing methods to be dull and without character. He wanted to find a textural, ornamented material and through experiments he developed the so called natural concrete. Viksjø's achievement has been interpreted by Solbakken (2010) as an attempt to establish an alternative to Miesian abstracts glass architecture by reinstating the ornamented façade. The American architect Paul Rudolph's experiments with concrete in the Art & Architecture building at Yale (finished 1964) show similarities with Viksjø's experiments. From 1955 and onwards Viksjø and Jystad internationally patented the technique of sand blasted concrete in Europe and in USA (Ref.: The archive of Norwegian Directorate of Public Construction and Property, The National Archive.)