

Miniature Megalopolis

Stories, Structures and Strategies of the Valley

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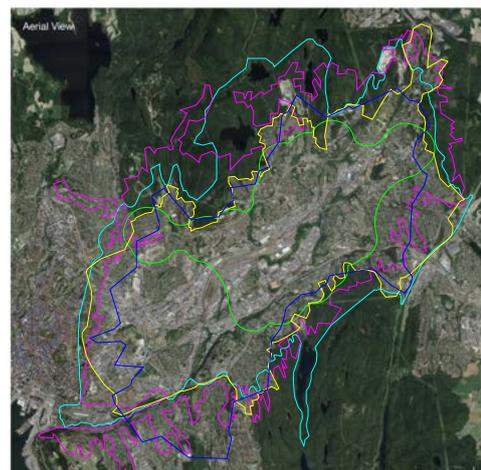
Miniature Megalopolis considers an urban and geographic entity in the north east part of Oslo - the valley usually referred to as Groruddalen. Sitting as a hinge between Oslo and its cultivated hinterland, the area is a complex a jumble of industry, cars, noise and messiness, interrupted by slender chimneys and the massive banana slabs, superlamellas and pyramid blocks of the satellite cities. Green patches of sport fields, agriculture, lawns and meadows provides breathing space. A place with a long history of housing workers and migrants, of social and cultural diversity, of freedom and coolness, but united mostly by its bad reputation. A goal of the project became to provide an understanding and a narrative for the urban condition of the valley.

During the course of the project, we have approached the valley from different angles.

- Going on weekly walks, making cross-sections of the valley.
- Sometimes dubbed “the valley of poets”, the valley is home to an impressive number of authors. We have been reading novels by authors such as Dag Solstad, Zeshan Shakar and Linn Strømsborg, allowing us to get closer to an understanding of life in the valley.

- To effectively work on such a huge geographical area, we have worked with a big table representing a synthesised version of the valley.
- Traditional tools of architecture and urbanism such as mapping, plans and sections have been utilised throughout the project.
- Building on our research on Norwegian urbanity as presented in the pre-diploma program.

The current municipal development strategy involves tidying up and redeveloping the mess of the valley, especially in the industrial areas. However, the valley is full of stories and surprises. Between industrial sheds and shopping malls, you stumble upon temples, rare breeds of lizard, dairy farms, the world’s biggest lamp, granite quarries and copper mines. There are children stealing cakes from the industrial bakeries, a baroque garden and an actual school for stone masons. Is it possible to identify an underlying logic in this chaos, to discern the outlines of a city in the urban noise? Could this urban condition of messiness be celebrated and provide a sense of autonomy and resistance, in stead of being swallowed by the planning logic of central Oslo?



To understand the origins of this intergrown urban condition, one of the pioneers of Norwegian urbanism, Sverre Pedersen, unexpectedly becomes an important character. A founding father of planning in Norway, he advocated for a Norwegian approach to urban form:

To me, Venice is no ideal city, as many others seem to think. A walk through the alleys of Venice after dark is almost like a nightmare because of the lack of overview, clarity and few means of orientation.

In my plan for Bodø, I have tried to show a clear construction of a city, where the terrain permitted.

- Sverre Pedersen, 1952

This is where the story of the valley begins. While Pedersen did little work after the war, and never any projects in Oslo, we argue that his legacy can be found in the satellite cities of the valley. His impact on the Norwegian built environment is undeniable. Besides doing planning work for over 100 Norwegian towns, he was the teacher for a generation of architects and planners, and this is where his legacy really lives on. The post-war era was when his ideas really came to life - through the next generation of architects. The valley would soon become the most important testing ground for radical urban experiments, and key to understanding any decade of Norwegian urbanism.

As development exploded in the post-war era - responding to the housing crisis - the valley of forest, agriculture and industry became cut by roads and dotted with satellite cities. The satellites were planned with the ambition of being independent entities - complete with civic and commercial functions, with the workplace being reached by public transport. They represented a new approach to urban form - miniature ideal cities.

With the continued development of the Valley, the miniature cities became nodes in a heterogeneous urban fabric, eventually constituting today's miniature megalopolis. To comprehend this condition, the valley's urban projects can be understood in the context of the Norwegian urban approach favoured by Sverre Pedersen. While the satellite cities are reminiscent of European and American ideals, they differ in the sense that they are highly sensitive to nature and topography, which clearly is a critical issue in the context of a valley. This sensitivity was greatly upheld by Pedersen, and links to an ideal of living in an open landscape.

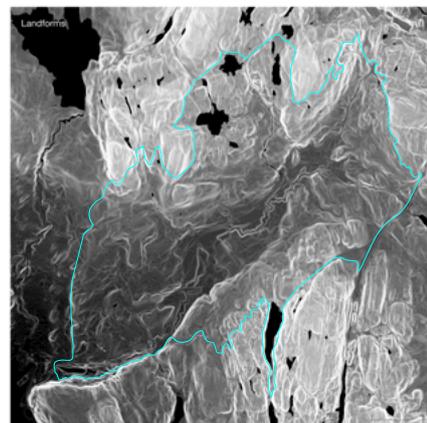
We have identified five underlying principles through

which we can trace this Norwegian approach to urban form:

- Nature
- Views
- Center
- Church
- Fields.

In order to learn from this approach, the satellite cities of the valley are considered on several levels. First, a level of **analysis** - understanding the planners' original intentions and tools used. The second level is a **critical view** - looking at the actual results and to what extent they were successful. We then consider the **current condition**, reflecting on how the urban fabric and the use of it has evolved since the establishment of each project. This forms the basis for a **proposal** - how could a future urban project look like if these aspects are considered - thereby being rooted in the urban logic of the area, while challenging precedent ideas. Finally, we consider how current regulations can be tackled in order to achieve the proposal. Thereby making the project a change in regulation rather than a finalised scheme.

1. Nature



The built often seems small against the backdrop of large formations and nature. The task of a planner, in all its modesty, is simply to not spoil the landscape, but to conform to it, harmoniously.

- Sverre Pedersen, 1952

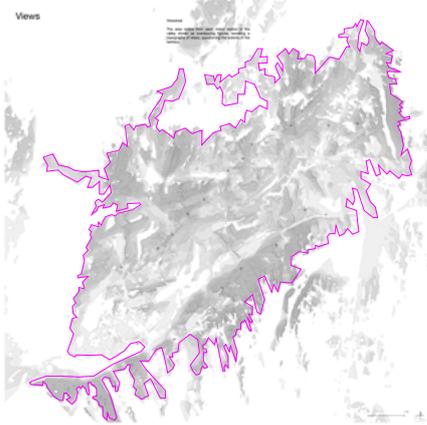
The satellite cities were planned in close proximity to nature, and their architecture adapted to natural features and topography. However, nature was considered as backdrop above all.

Today, parks and nature implies more than backdrop, and the performative aspect cannot be ignored.

We propose a reopening of all of the streams and rivers

of the valley - providing a project of fountains and baths - serving recreational as well as ecological purposes. Natural features hold an important position in today's planning regime, but are too often trumped by developers' concerns and dependent on bottom-up interest groups. In order for the ambitious strategy to work, this is where the municipality should employ its most heavy-handed approach, giving the highest priority to the aspect of nature.

2. Views



New planned areas should be in touch with the landscape and offer as many views as possible through clear and powerful gestures.

- Sverre Pedersen, 1952

An important aspect in the architecture and planning of the satellite cities, was to be in touch with the landscape, even in dense neighbourhoods. This was achieved through typologies providing views - such as terraced blocks, slabs and towers.

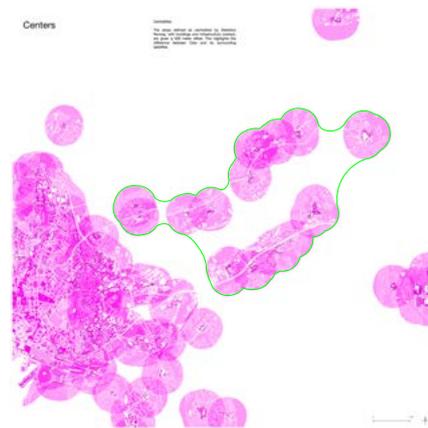
Being "in touch" with the landscape today implies more than passively looking at it. We propose to add an element of isotropy - being able to go from anywhere to anywhere. This is done by looking at the pedestrian network, stitching together stubs and dead ends.

Today's municipal strategy involves connecting the valley to central Oslo through large gestures. By shifting the focus towards interconnections, the hierarchical logic of the valley's infrastructure is undermined, taking the intergrown urban condition seriously.

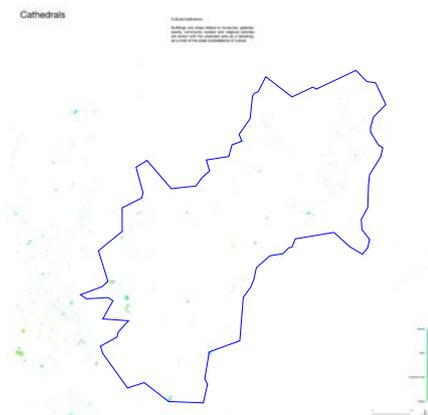
3. Center

We will not easily become normal city-dwellers, for whom the street and the plaza are main interests.

- Sverre Pedersen, 1952



While most of the satellite cities were planned with commercial and civic centers, these could not compete with central Oslo, and soon became obsolete. Most of them are now reduced to a grocery store and a pub. Instead of imposing new program onto them, we propose to highlight the opportunities inherent in the plot structures of the satellites - few, large plots co-owned by the hundreds of inhabitants. Without the need for a multitude of shopping malls, the common grounds could be imagined as urban islands, showcasing what is already there, bringing dead heroes and forgotten stories back to life.



4. Church

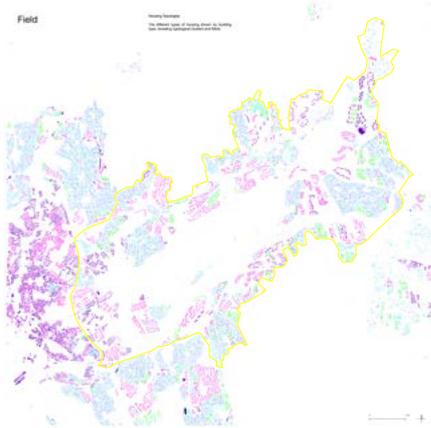
There is a tradition in this country to place the church on a hill.

- Sverre Pedersen, 1952

The churches were a natural part of the satellite cities, as community centers and gathering places. Today, however, they do not have the same significance. The concept of church can be extended to include other forms of cultural activity and institutions. Local politicians are advocating for museums and cultural institutions as a means to invigorate an overlooked area - heavy investments, requiring long-winded political processes.

We propose to turn the planning logic of cultural institutions on its head - from top-down to bottom-up. Suggesting that perhaps the churches and cathedrals of the valley

are already present. The strategy becomes a speculation rather than an architectural project, where the potential of existing structures is explored. In particular, there is a lot of garages occupying some of the most valuable sites in the area. Could they become cathedrals of the valley, or perhaps they already are?



5. Fields

We Norwegians don't mind living together, in spacious neighbourhoods, but as much as possible we want to feel like we live in an open landscape.

- Sverre Pedersen, 1952

The valley is scattered with building typologies that were able to overcome difficult topography, being easy to build as well as housing many. At the same time, they provide ideal sunshine conditions, and the perception of living in an open landscape.

With the lack of unused plots in the valley, the municipality's current strategy for housing development involves the transformation of industrial areas. This is a long-winded process, where for the plot owners, it pays to wait as long as possible. The municipality employs a strategy dependent on cooperation from many different plot owners. This has resulted in some strange urban areas where industry and residential buildings coexist, but without any integration. We propose to use the fragmented plot structures to our advantage, by providing incentives for the plot owners to develop the plots themselves. This would make it an



advantage to act early - to not be limited by what your neighbours build - thereby making use of the tool of regulation to trigger bottom-up private initiatives within a set framework, mediating the distance between public and private development.

Implementation

The potential of these five overlapping strategies is exemplified in three sites, illustrating how the strategies play different roles in different areas. The speculated implementations show how the five strategies complement and depend on each other - a backyard in the strategy for *fields* becomes a shortcut integrated in the strategy for *views*. Some places have an almost invisible urbanism - precise adjustments, alterations and insertions. Others are more thoroughly transformed, revealing new models for production and life.

An underdeveloped element in the planning of the satellite cities, and not part of Sverre Pedersen's legacy, is the aspect of demography - the boroughs in the valley have struggled with social issues and unemployment. In light of this, an emancipation from central Oslo would provide the valley with an interconnected urban tissue as a means for social integration and dialogue. In the field strategy, the boundary between residence and sites for production is blurred, potentially piloting a model for the productive city. This integration of home and workplace could ultimately become a vehicle for social justice.

The union of residential and industrial programs challenges the pastoral mindset in which the satellite cities were planned - with agricultural landscapes being thought of as romantic backdrops. Today the productive landscapes of the valley are industrial rather than agricultural, but could we rethink what is a picturesque view or a pastoral landscape, thereby challenging the idea of looking at production from a safe distance? Allowing industry to become an integrated, meaningful part of the city and of daily life. In this vision, the urban tissue becomes the landscape to admire, explore and inhabit.

Ironically, the valley turned into Sverre Pedersen's nightmare, with its lack of clarity and overview. It is, however, exactly this fuzzy urban character that holds the valley together, and ultimately allows it to emancipate from central Oslo, celebrating its freeness and bad reputation, giving the urban project to its inhabitants.