The urban potential in a Jugend town
Erling Dokk Holm, Doctoral Candidate at the Oslo School of Architecture.

The question I would like to raise here is: Can a town with a distinct cultural and historical visual trace, with a massive number of buildings dating back to a period where the economy and the logic of it was quite another one, still survive as something on its own? Or is it doomed to either retire into a museal theme park, or to let the economic forces transform it into an updated version of the concept 'city'.

My empirical case is the town of Ålesund.

Ålesund as we know it today was born out of a fire. During European history, the fires have been the primary city developing tools. Without the fires some of our finest towns would never have seen the light. This is especially true in the Nordic countries, where wood was the instinctive building material.

In the great fire of 23rd January 1904 the whole town of Ålesund was destroyed, 850 houses burnt down and it looked like a battlefield from wars not jet to bee seen. But very rapidly a new town rose. In a short time span, from 1904-1907 an entirety new town, with a remarkable face rose like a phoenix from the ashes.

All buildings were now built in stone and in a remarkable and highly decorative style of architecture, Art Nouveau - Jugendstil. 50 architects, strongly inspired by international influences and National Romanticism, designed more than 400 houses. This gave a certain European fleur to the city, but the new architecture also represented a regional Ålesund is unique in the history of Norwegian architecture and of great international importance as well. Norway was 100 years ago a small and rather poor country in the periphery of Europe. The peripheral position in terms of geography is still the same, but regarding economic level, everything is changed. It is among the richest part of one of the wealthiest countries in the world. It is amazing that 100 years ago a cultural import – as Jugend where – could be embraced by a city like this. But the staggering facts are today highly visible. A city made out of concrete and stones do not burn down. And if the sea level doesn't rise too much the city will properly last forever. But in which form and with what content, that is the question? Ålesund is an interesting example of how architectural historical resources are under severe pressure from the new economic logic of suburbanization, and how the ideas of historical preservation are challenged.

The city today

Ålesund is located in a scenic nature. Although the story goes back to the medieval period, the cities expansion takes place in the last part of the 19.th century – trade, fisheries and light industry are the main reasons for the growth. The fire that wipes out the wooden city comes – seen in a distance – at a perfect time. A new material structure that can match the demand of a rising capitalist mode of production is highly welcome. The old wooden city was a limitation to the economy, and would sooner or later have been removed anyhow. In the post-fire period, from 1907 until the 1950-ties the number

of inhabitants in Ålesund city was stable about 12000. In terms of density Ålesund was among the very few Norwegian towns that could offer anything that resembles of a standard European town. Most Norwegian towns are not towns, but more oversized road crosses. Which is fine. But the remarkable position Ålesund has in Norway is not that it is a town with a high number of Jugendhouses, but that it is a town. The visual quality of this fact is also easily demonstrated by the almost absurd picturesque the city creates contrasted by the dramatic nature.

Ålesund today is a mix between jugend and everything else in still regimes the last 100 years. Some of it is good; some of it rejects ever association to positive adverbs. Notably has there been a strong emphasis on architecture that 'blends' in with the surroundings, and that 'shows sensibility towards the history'. This strategy, however intelligent it might be seen, produces with few, if any exceptions, rubbish. Ålesund is full of this architecture, and it makes no good at all.

Today the number of people living in the core city is reduced to 5000 people. But the overall population in the municipality is growing, and has risen to 40 000. Most people in the municipality just don't live in Ålesund city, the live somewhere else.

Only 13 % of the inhabitants in Ålesund live in flats. The rest lives in single family or two-family houses. This numbers are very similar to those who exist for the country as a whole, and maybe the most interesting number is that 70 % live in a house built after 1960. In other words, what's has happened since 1960, is in structural terms anti-urban.

The suburbanization of Norway has been radical. While only 1/3 of the population lived in single houses dwellings in 1960, the same year as cars where sold free, 70 % of the countries citizens now can claim that position. This is by far the largest percentage of any European country, and it is matched by another interesting parameter. The number of shopping mall square meters per habitant.

0,73 m2. That is about the double of the European average, and this is also reflected in the consumption per capita. 2800 euro, compared with 1100 euro among the west-European states. In Ålesund municipality the average is 3600 euro, a number only comparable to some very wealthy suburbs in the USA.

Ålesund is as this map illustrates challenged by the altered ways of growth, the increased population now settles almost everywhere, and the once dense city core – still the densest – is no longer the de facto economic center of gravity in the district. A small place called Spjelkavik has taken over that role. This role is not accepted in ant political document or given a formal declaration. But its physical proof is unmistakable. The Shopping mall Stormoa is Norway's 6. Largest, but Ålesund is not among the countries 20 largest cities. So there is a huge disproportion between the municipality and the size of the shopping mall. Stormoa shopping mall is the logic and the logistic answer to the new sub-urbanization, and the existence of this mall accelerate the development towards an even sharper suburbanization process.

The suburbanization is a prosaic physical long-term operation that converts the landscape. It transforms the countryside into something new, neither rural, nor urban. Suburbanization is clearly depended on the private automobile, and would not exist without it. And the profound place the private car attains in a suburbanized society is not due to an arbitrary effect. Suburbanization is an ideology, and at a certain points this

way of orchestrating the thoughts will also be invading the classical urban territories. And that is what is happening these days.

In Ålesund, there is now a political leadership who accept the increasing destruction of the Jugend city. Today there are less than 300 Jugend houses left, compared to the more than 400 who where built 100 years ago. Even if the historical city was given new interest from the 1970-ties and onward, and achieved its protection, this juridical status is daily challenged by demands of a more modern and business friendly town. This gives two results: one is that there is a growing acceptance for removing old Jugend houses and substitute them with new more business friendly buildings. This is in it self a short sighted policy which makes long term harm to the cities future, both regarding the tourist industry and the cities own self respect.

The other result is an increase in superficial conservation, as this picture shows, the façade is kept, and the idea that this is a good solution for all practical purposes is indeed true. But it is a strategy that in the longer run deconstruct the link between facade and history, or to put it another way; it disconnect meaning from the intention of the historical object and the face ends up as a fetish. The kind of 'feel good' conservation strategy is of course popular, due to its ability to let new economic forces on board. But it is never the less a road that is so pragmatic that it ends up in reinstalling Jugend as pure decoration. And in my view it was, and still is so much more.

But if we now take a sharper look on the urban qualities of the city it is clear that it has something more advanced to offer than the shopping mall, it has public spaces with some astonishing qualities.

And in my perspective, the public spaces are essential to keep an urban atmosphere alive, and by this also creating the city as something essential different from the suburban territories.

What is a public space?

The idea that there is a phenomenon to be understood as public space is intimately connected to the existence of modernity, and to urbanity. The Greek ideal type of public space, the agora, it a space where all kinds of discussions would take place, and where all free men in this society would be present. The agora is the civil society's core, it is here where the individual as a private person leaves his private ness behind and enters a community, and where the state as a formative power, is open to a debate about its relevance, legitimacy and functions. The agora is a space where democracy is lives, not as a formal institution, but as a civilization. The parliament is the formalized agora, and the place where decisions are taken. The parliament is a body of power, which necessitate a civil space, a space in-between the state and the private realm. The agora is therefore the space that makes democracy to a real institution, a space that enables the foundation of democracy to foster and live, the diabetes, the discourses, the discussions, and more important, the social praxis that not only respect the majority's right to shape the face of politics, but also defend and encourage the minority right to integrity and freedom of thought.

The idea that the Greece civilization was entirely a democratic movement is wrong, most historians will conclude that the type of democracy that was develop in this civilization was important, but ha a limited reach. Athens was after all not the only Greek civilization,

and the majority of the members in this structure – women and slaves – had non rights at all. A third argument is that this legitimacy had a limited influence on the societies more fundamental structures as class and economic power.

If the public space is a democratic space, then it is a core for a society thriving for greater freedom of information, and for more democratic institutions. This role, - as the space where opposition is fostered – is vital in the understanding of the public space as the democratic space, but is it also a necessary part of such a definition when the forces in society are know longer in an organized conflict with each other?

There is a historical argument connected to the agora, while the agora was an ideal pace, a moral institution who brewed the first democracy on earth, the idea created in this space, is a mental answer to the spatial construct, the idea that conversations should be Socratic, that arguments will be tested and tested and the passion for the elaborative element in a conversation is the holy fundament for the concept of public space. The literature addressing Habermas' theory and his own work concerning the questions of dialog, consensus, the rationale of arguments and public sphere and the democratic element are overwhelming. And it is not my intention to describe it all or to justify a conclusive argument about the ideas of a rational debate, but I like to underscore that Habermas' ideas have had an enormous influence and almost everything that is written on the physical public space, even if his discussion on the topic of physical public space is rather limited, the concept seems to make up an ideal type for him. As he writes:

> 'By 'public sphere' we mean first of all a domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere is constituted in every conversation in which private persons come together to form a public. When the public is large, this kind of communication requires certain means of dissemination and influence; today newspapers and periodicals, radio and television are the media of the public sphere. We speak of a political public sphere when the public discussions concern objects connected with the practice of the state.'

> Habermas, 1991

An essential feature for Habermas is the meaning of neutral ground, a territory where no one has any priority. Only by this predisposition the possibility of giving all members of a society the same right to speak, to discuss, to take part in an elaborative formative practice. The public space is in this form "neutral", it is institutionalized as being neutral and this quality makes it public, and discriminates the other formal positions it might have –as ownership etc. A public space is "owned "by no one, therefore by everyone.

This combination of being no ones and everybody's it the primary function of a public space and the core of the meaning of this expression. This doesn't mean that it is without ranks or social stratificated visibility, but that the basic concept enables a space like this to be the best possible arena for a free /herredømme fri dialog

The social utopia of a total democratic space is in Habermas writing manifested in the spatial structure the English coffee houses from the 17-the century. But a public space is in it broadest sense nothing else than a area all citizens have a formal juridical access

4

to. Most citizens have the right to enter streets and squares, and they can bee there without even knowing the formal juridical status of the site, which owns a pavement, or a street is of no interest to the general publics as long as they have access. But even such an urban environment is framed in one way or another. There are limitations regarding behavior and dressing codes. Very drunk people, naked men and women, or citizen performing acts that are considered insulting to the general public will in most cases be forced to do their business other places.

It is for example forbidden to pea on the streets of London, and Lisbon, even if Hyde Park is a huge park, you can't behave like you can in the Alps. Where you actually can urinate freely. The Alps – at least a major part of them have a juridical status as a public space – open anyone. But on the other hand, here it is forbidden to use mechanical transportation facilities as cars.

In another and more limited understanding, a public space is a space where the citizens meet to carve out their own expression as a public and as citizens. That is to say: to represent their own will in the formative action of being public citizens, the embedment of a participation in a social frame. That can be emanzipatorical actions where the will of the people is formulated through political agendas or the more smooth tongues of a deliberative debate. This is a very athenic thought that also finds its advocates in today's debates. The idea is that the public space is decisive in shaping a personality as a significant other in society, and that this citizen is integrated in the political system and the field of politics through social participation in a limited spatial field. Edward Soya emphasizes such an understanding when he formulates the sentences: 'Urban spatial specificity...' (Soja 2000).

Many will argue that the streets in the newly industrialized cities of North-America and Europe in the 19-centry are to be understood as such arenas of public space (Stephens 1998). It was not the individual's juridical right to use the streets that made tem public, but that groups with defines political and social agendas took them in their use. This way they formed a new type of 'collective rights'. This type of public use reshapes the streets and the squares to arenas for political fights and propaganda, political activities and organization.

In Marshall Bermans essay Take it to the streets: conflict and community in Public Space (Berman 1986), he writes that this period was identifies by an intimate relation between the street and the politics, a relation that has been substantially weakened in the 20-centery, especially in the postwar period. Also in his very famous book, all that is solid melts into air (1983) he emphasizes this feature. Elias Canetti's autobiography (Canetti 1983) is describing the period in Vienna at the beginning of the 20th century. This text is one of the most precise descriptions about this phenomenon. The streets are here understood as a physical space with the potential of being a medium for political action and social unrest. Canettis sees the streets as a practical tool for the working class, basically because it is in the power of the masses, and the masses are at home in the streets, or to put it another way: the streets are the mental home of the masses. The streets have this vast potential for breeding social change through political actions, but this is not primary a conscious state, it is a psychology more interwoven into the masses subliminal conciseness.

For Berman the streets are the cradle of modernism, it is here the meeting between the known and the unknown, between the new and the old, takes place. His witness is the

5

birth of the modernism in literature and Charles Baudelaire's poems. In the Fleurs de Mal – Baudelaire's collections of poems – from 1857 is the strong ability to enter the 'maelstrom', to leave the earlier life behind, to find a comfort in the insecurity of the flow of the streets, the unknown faces, the unknown consequences of life as it will be, not as it has been.

The question of taking part

Engaging in the new as a phenomena, and to establish both a social reality around it, and to encounter a moral and esthetic position that embraces the possibilities of the future. This is the position of the desperate modernity, the vitalism, but also an approach to life where the urbanity is something more than a description of a way of life. Urbanity is in it self an essential and necessary ingredients in the liberation from old formative powers, urbanity includes the potential of emancipation, and more important: it is a social structure that alter the course of human civilization because it enables the physical surroundings to shape the mental content, and it creates a crowd and in its more sophisticated and rational form: a public and the space that public will invade, and control, and therefore: in the city the public space is not only something to wish for, but an intrinsic part of the urban life.

George Simmel, more than anyone elaborates on this theme a few decades later. In his encounter of the crowed city as the central territory of modernity. He will point not only the tools of modernization – in technical and rational terms – as industrial structures, finance institutions, services, education and political and administrative institutions. He will also include the pure spatial qualities of the city, qualities that creates a new sociality and a new cultural condition.

This understanding of the public space as an arena where meetings between strangers can take place, is a strong tradition, and has the last decades been nurtured by the radical movements of the urban sphere in all western countries from the late 1960-ties and until today. Julie Stephens argues that the left in USA during the 1960-ies found the street as a democratic and political relevant space. In her book *Anti-disciplinary protest: sixties radicalism and postmodernism* (Stephens 1998), she is emphasizing that this spatial understanding of the arenas of modern societies also made its way to the production of theories, postmodern theories are in her understand linked directly to the strong emphasis on the search for other and less formal arenas than the traditional political institutions.

'Like other forms of sixties radicalism, the anti-disciplinary politics of the Yippies shared a commitment to the idea of 'the streets'; faith that there was a space outside' and separate from the dominant institutions of mainstream culture. While this notion of the streets at times literally meant footpaths, roads and public places where guerrilla theatre could take place, at other times it took on a more metaphoric significance signaling an autonomous cultural sphere unclouded by the delusions of mass culture.

Julie Stephens is referring to Gregory Jameson, which in his book *Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism* call attention to the basic formulations of radical politics:
'negativity', 'opposition', 'critique', 'suberversity' and 'reflexivity'. These formulations are based on a spatial conceptual divide. In other words: radical politics is not possible to understand as a historical moment without seeing it in an urban context. And then not as

a correlation between events and territories, but as a causal effect. Without the spaces in the city, no politics. The city as a medium is the urban fabric as the arenas where public debate and public political events took place.

Interesting enough, the fight for conservation, the political and cultural wakening of movement to defend the Jugend city in Ålesund took place in the beginning of the 1970-ies and was a very physical movement. They occupied houses, and sparked political debate. They where fostered out of the pure urban landscape. The resistance was a result of a still existing political use of the urban Ålesund.

The idea of radical politics is based on a rather simple precondition, a spatial precondition, which might be summed up in the well-used sentence: "critical distance". This notion is also a perspective used to explain that older forms of politics had such a basis. In a more or less established European buildings tradition – like it is now through the textbooks, the guidebooks and the travel programs on TV – there exists close connection between public sphere and the urbane. The first cities in western civilization has a space where the mutual conversations take place, the Greek agora, - the square – is maybe the first truly democratic space known in our hemisphere.

This limited physical area was alone the frame that constituted the public sphere through being the ground for exchange of arguments and elaborative practice. The democracy that existed in Athens 400 years before our time was a direct democracy. In contrary to modern representative democracies, here neither political parties nor representatives existed. The single citizen represented him self, no one else. But being a citizen was by no mean the normal position in this society. Among about 300,000 inhabitants of Athens only 32,000 were citizens. A citizen was a man – minimum 18 year old – with both parents from Athens, and with a certain minimum of property. Women had no rights, and the slaves who counted for 125000 of the inhabitants were denied all kinds of rights and the 15000 immigrants where also without access to the democracy. The primary economic foundation of the society was the slaves and they where therefore the ground the Greek democracy was build. The slaves freed the citizens from work, and the citizens could therefore occupy themselves with politics on a full time scale. The viability / lively street life of the agora where all kinds of questions where discussed owed its existence to fact that the ruler class had freed it self from work by forcing others into slavery.

This form of free and informal discussion had a parallel in the formalized political institutions, the so-called Ecclesia, the assembly, had meetings every 8. day and here all-important decisions where taken, and all questions where dealt with by majority decisions, and the political positions where distributed by a draw. Another essential feature for the democracy in Athens was that only about 10 % of the citizens used their rights to access the Ecclesia. If all men over 18 had taken part in the political process the system would have broken down. There was no capacity in Athens to absorb all those who actually had full political rights.

In others words, only when a majority of those who have the possibility tot take part choose to do something else, this democracy could work. The Greek democracy survived in this form not much longer than 100 year but the ideas it fosters where so strong and had such a penetrating effect on the discourse of government that the model became an ideal.

More important in this context, is that the urban crowded units had specific prerequisites to handle disagreement and discussions in a peaceful way. Therefore the agora has been a romantic institution in the modern debate on public sphere and the city, but also a real admonition that there is such thing as a historical reality. The agora was a requirement for the institutionalized politics. In the agora the procedure of deliberating and discussions folded them selves out, and laid the foundation for the later political process. Therefore will the existence of the physical urban space enable existence of the political system. It is this relation, a causal effect, which makes up much of the background for modern theories on urbanity.

The Belgium political scientist Chantal Mouffe has in several texts explored the meaning of radical politics and space. On of her points is that the deliberate tradition – the Habermasian way on looking on democracy – doesn't get to grip with a public sphere that is less consensus oriented and more agonistic. She declares a greater tolerance for different and often non-cooperative and non-inclusive behavior, and has introduced what she enables as an "agonistic model" pursuing the less idyllic parts of politics. (Mouffe 2005).

By this positions Chantal Mouffe has taken a clear stand against the habermasian way of understanding democracy and the public sphere – as a perpetual movement towards more rational communication, more consensus, and that the force of the arguments that are important. A debate should following this view have an ethic agenda, where the moral substantive position it found in its trust in the force of the arguments, and sort out all other formative powers – as economy.

Chantal Mouffe is by this connecting to another tradition, the one so clear formulated by Richard Sennet. In his book The Fall of Public Man the American sociologist is presenting at theory about the development of public spaces. In his view the public and the public spaces are changing status during the 18th century in Europe. Due to the transformation of the economy – a clear shift into capitalism – the public and its spaces are also transformed. The new class society is substituting not only an old class system, but is also followed by a new Weltanschauung. First the new more aggressive industrial capitalism makes it possible to change positions in society: the economic mobility is rapidly declassify the old rules and enforcing a new set of mobility positions. To move upwards becomes not only a possibility, but also a position so many of the new striving individuals in the bourgeois class tries to achieve, so therefore it becomes an important feature of life to be on the way upwards, and to show it. The growing secularization of society enables the more role oriented and essentialist view on the individuals to be challenged. This is in short, the arrival of modernity, and a modernity, which sets the individual in a center where he has to be accountable for his behavior and his presence.

The paradox is that even if the new times meant that there was a wider potential for a more self-fulfilling life projects for an increased part of the citizens in a society, the social life as so is more rigid. Those who have occupied a new and higher position in the class structure are by this committed to this new class in a much more inelastic way than earlier. Sennets view is that there was a balance between the private and the public questions in the age of enlightenment. There was a place for the public life to be lived, but also a commitment to concrete tasks. Sennets write:

> "The line between public and private was essential one on which claims
> and civility – epitomized by cosmopolitan, public behavior – epitomized by

the family. "

Sennet, p. 82.

His claim is that to walk and talk among strangers in an easy and polite way was a form of civilizatoric standard requirement. It was this ability that made a person reckoned as a social being. In his home – which was considered as nature, and therefore natural – the individuals lived their natural talents for deeper friendship and parenthood.

”While man made himself in public, he realized his nature in the private realm,...”.

Sennet, p. 83.

In Sennet's view well-integrated individuals in the society of enlightment could meet with a form of professional attitude and conduct the real openness towards people whom he never earlier had seen, and probably never would be seen again. It is like the public space in Sennet's understanding was a common spatial commune, where all those who take part are aware of their role. They are more to be considered as players on a scene than authentic individuals. They are not supposed to express their inner thoughts, or what they want and what the feel. Their task is to take part in society building procedure, where the goal is the process. The social construction in this setting doesn't accept or reward intimate or private orientation outside of the private sphere, that is to say: outside of the family.

In Sennet's view there is one essential force that contributed to the process and changing the relation between the private and the public during the 19th century, and that is the double relation between the industrial capitalism and its function towards the public life in the metropolis in the 19th century.

This doubleness is by Sennets understanding an effect of capitalism's increasing pressure towards an even stronger strife for privatization of the bourgeois society. Event if Sennet maybe was right then, he is even more accurate today. The introduction of the private automobile, the mall and the sprawl, has made privatization the de facto normality. If Ålesund is a victim, it is to the privatization of space, and this process will in the end remove the jugend town. The ways to defend a city against such a fate is – as always – to reformulate the essence of what it is being an urban entity. To me that is to reoccupy the public space with public activities, and to foster a permanent discussion on the cultural and historical relevance of the physical heritage. To do so, a city must commit it self not only to strict preservation politics, but also to aggressively enhance the pure physical qualities of the city. A public space is after all a space, not a sphere.