

### REMOVALS

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In 2016, Even Smith Wergeland, Johanne Borthne, Vilhelm Christensen and I produced a documentary project *City of Dislocation*, in which we surveyed a number of cultural buildings. These were in the process of being evacuated and emptied of their previous functions. The National Gallery, the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Museum of Decorative Arts and Design, the Deichman Central Library and the Munch Museum were among fourteen cultural institutions, all of which were to be removed from the buildings they had occupied for many years. These five became our primary objects of study. The project culminated in an exhibition and a debate programme under the auspices of the predecessor of Oslobiennalen, Oslo Pilot, in the spring of 2016.

The aim of the project was not only to show that the evacuation of high-quality buildings without concrete plans for their use afterwards constituted a poor use of resources. It was just as important to discuss the fact that these major evacuations were happening all at once without a coherent overall plan. The parallel moving processes were never considered together as a whole, and neither the urban-developmental, social or economic consequences of this major 'reshuffle' had been analysed – although 'reshuffle' is possibly the wrong word, since no direct exchange was involved in any case – only the removal of vibrant cultural nodes from various neighbourhoods.

The dynamic behind the evacuations was ideological and political. Consolidation and concentration make public enterprises more efficient, at the same time strengthening the city as a tourist destination. The vision of the 'Fjord City' included a belt of new buildings signalling culture along the sea front, where the Central Library, the Munch Museum and the combined National Museum were to grace the waterfront along with the Opera. Just as the main street Karl Johans gate once took the city centre away from the 'Quadrature', and before that the Quadrature had created a new focal point, the Fjord City was to establish a new centre in Oslo. The Fjord City's consolidation of economic power in the Barcode project and Aker Brygge, and of cultural power through the major art institutions, was important in creating a true centre of gravity.

In the wake of this process, there were now several empty buildings that had once enjoyed great prestige. Buildings that had explicitly set out to express their time and manifest their function in public space – the outcome of high-profile architectural competitions and high public expectation. One of these was the 110-year-old building on the square Bankplassen.

## 1990

An old-fashioned voice-over accompanied the TV audience into the newly opened Museum of Contemporary Art in 1990. The public were invited into “a large, heavy building, a fortress that protects what we have collected,” as the narrator commented with ambiguous chattiness, referring to the building’s earlier life as a bank.<sup>1</sup> NRK’s documentary *Time, money and art* showed glimpses of the building work preceding the museum opening. The concrete, down-to earth functions of the bank building, and the more ephemeral, high-cultural function of the contemporary art exhibition space were presented as if in opposition to each other. “Walls are painted, chandeliers removed, windows covered up. Renewal. The building is nevertheless the same. Will the building also be able to exhibit traces of our lives?” came the leading question from the voice-over.

To mark this new era for contemporary art in Norway, the director Jan Brockmann launched the new periodical *Terskel* (‘Threshold’), and the exhibition *Terskel 1*, mounted for the opening, manifested many aspects of the newly established institution. As a modern museum, its institutional self-assurance was important, and the history of the building and the square was given a prominent place in the magazine. The physical framework of the building itself gave rise to the ‘Threshold’ name, since the stairway to the museum, for historicizing reasons, failed to adhere to the latest ‘universal design’ principles of accessibility for all.

<sup>1</sup> Tid, penger og kunst, produced by Stig Andersen and Bjørn Engvik, NRK 20.02.1990, accessible at <https://tv.nrk.no/program/FSAM08000190>.

## 1907

In 1907, the Norwegian central bank Norges Bank opened at Bankplassen 4. This was the second of the Norges Bank buildings on Bankplassen. The first had been built as a branch when the bank had its headquarters in Trondheim, and was given the address Bankplassen 3. The branch was completed in 1828 and was designed by the particularly efficient architect Christian Heinrich Grosch. When Norges Bank acquired its headquarters in Christiania in 1897, Bankplassen 3 was too small, and a new, larger and more prestigious building was needed.<sup>2</sup>

In *Terskel 1*, the interior architect Kay Maria Staalund wrote about the competition to design the building, announced in 1900. It was already clear from the competition brief that the building also had to provide space for the public, which led to, among other things, the magnificent sky-lit hall, which was later to become the main space in the Museum of Contemporary Art.<sup>3</sup> The commission for the design of a new flag-ship building for Norges Bank was an attractive one, and a total of 62 proposals were submitted. The winner of the competition was the architect Ingvar Olsen Hjorth, who later went on to design the east wing of the National Gallery.<sup>4</sup>

As a structure of national importance, the building was to be “Norwegian” and exhibit its national identity through the choice of materials, through craftsmanship and decoration. Rough-hewn greyish-blue bricks of Larvik syenite were used on the facade, and the national aspect continues in the interior of the building (with more Norwegian stone such as rough-hewn labradorite, among others).<sup>5</sup> The organic lines of the interior announce the arrival of the Art Nouveau style in Norway.

<sup>2</sup> When the removals had been completed, the National Archives moved into Bankplassen 3 in 1914. Today the building houses the National Museum – Architecture, after an extensive reprojecting by Sverre Fehn.

<sup>3</sup> Kay Maria Staalund, “Norges Bank – bygningshistorie”, in *Terskel 1/1990*, p. 211.

<sup>4</sup> Oslo Byleksikon, Oslo: Kunnskapsforlaget, 2010, p. 206.

<sup>5</sup> Staalund, 213.

To return to the documentary *Time, money and art*, which included several interviews with former bank employees, the viewers were given glimpses of the inner life of the bank, the social function of the interior skylit aula, the bad smell of bank notes from the cod fisheries, and images of the bank surrounded by stacks of wood during the war. The building functioned as a bank for almost 80 years until Norges Bank once more needed larger premises and a new expression of its identity, this time occupying a whole neighbourhood on the east side of Bankplassen. In 1983, Norges Bank had proposed that the building should be used for cultural purposes, inasmuch as a report from the Norwegian Directorate for Public Construction and Property (now called Statsbygg) declared, rather startlingly, that the old office building was probably “unsuitable for office purposes.”<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, according to the report, it offered very suitable premises for a museum, so the way was now paved for a new reshuffle.

1837

The picture shows the demolition of the Christiania Theatre at Bankplassen 4 in 1899. At that time, the theatre had been operating since 1837, and had played a central role in the cultural aspects of nation-building. It was the place where *Peer Gynt* was premiered, and its directors had included both Henrik Ibsen and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. Now it had to go, and a new building for Norges Bank was built in its place. The seating for 900 people, which had been upgraded from 800 in 1863, had become far too small for a modern European city. In addition, it was necessary to give it a more prominent site where the new Christiania had taken shape, a national theatre along the main Karl Johan axis.

For 60 years, the theatre had been the city's cultural living room, and along with Cafe Engebret, the regular haunt of stage artists, it made Bankplassen a vibrant space in the city. By the end of the 1800s the building no longer lived up to the expectations of the age, although the theatre had been an attraction when it first opened. “On 5th October 1837 the theatre on Bankpladsen was finished – a building the age considered to be of an impressive character,” one can read in the *Festschrift* for the new theatre in 1899.<sup>7</sup> But this changed with the growth of the city:

“Gradually it was felt that the building was too small and too poor, its furnishings and inventory too far behind the times, and above all its location rather unfortunate. The growth of the city towards the west and north pushed the theatre on Bankpladsen farther and farther away from the centre. An urge was felt for a new theatre, centrally located, with up-to-date equipment, worthy of the capital with its population of 80,000.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The findings of the report are to be found in Jan Brockmann, “Til åpningen av museet”, in *Terskel* 1/1990, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> *Nationaltheatret i Kristiania: Festschrift i anledning af Nationaltheaterets aabning 1ste september 1899*, Kristiania: Det Norske Actieforlag 1899, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Festschrift*, p. 2.

Bankplassen 4 stands vacant. Traces of the museum still remain in the rooms and corridors. Old light fittings lie in neat stacks waiting to be taken away; the walls show scars from the removal of the exhibition surfaces. On one wall the traces of a work by Jan Christensen are still legible. Newly reopened windows can once more shed daylight on the ceremonial premises. Wear and tear on the old control room is unable to conceal the imposing monumentality.

In 1877, after a fire in the theatre building, it was decided to create a new theatre. Money was collected from donations, and the Studenterlunden park stood out as an ideal location. But the State put its foot down, this time taking the view that culture had no business being so close to the University. Several sites were reviewed and investigated, but after ten years of arid argument the state gave in and Studenterlunden was chosen on as the final site.

The competition for a theatre design with 1,200 seats was announced in 1891, and Henrik Bull, who came second in the competition for Bankplassen 4, was awarded the commission.<sup>9</sup> The building was completed in 1906, a few months before the opening of the new Norges Bank at Bankplassen 4.

It is possible that the wind has changed direction slightly over the three years since our *City of Dislocation* project. The National Gallery is after all to be owned by the museum, as a kind of satellite along with the Museum of Architecture at Bankplassen 3. And the National Theatre is to move into the old Munch Museum, adding an extra stage.

The idea of branding districts with new symbolic buildings seems weaker, and the idea of re-using buildings has strengthened alongside the awareness that an existing building can also confer iconic status. One example is the evacuated US Embassy designed by the Finnish-American architect Eero Saarinen, which was the object of a long, heated round of proposals in 2018. The winner was a private investor who wants to use the building to profile his firm. At the same time, hotel owner Petter Stordalen has got hold of Jernbanetorget and made use of two iconic buildings on each side of the square as hotels; one, Amerikalinjen, bases its whole concept on the building's history, while the other one builds on an iconic building by Knut Knutsen.

Of the five buildings we studied in *City of Dislocation*, two still remain devoid of any new function. One is the old Deichman Library, which should be incorporated into the new Government District.<sup>10</sup> The other is Bankplassen 4.

<sup>9</sup> Bull in fact also won second place in this competition, but since his proposal was more realistic to implement, it was the one that was realized.

<sup>10</sup> Kristiania University College has recently considered buying the building: <https://www.aftenposten.no/osloby/i/OnxOvA/Privat-hoyskole-vil-kjope-Deichman>