



C20 is supporting the local campaign to save Erling Viksjø's 1969 Y-Block government offices. James Simpson explains why it is a key work of Norwegian modernism

# Oslo masterwork

I saw the Y-Block in September 2017 on my way back from a Building Limes Forum conference in Trondheim. Despite my saying that I was not a natural admirer of modern architecture, Siri Hoem and Linn Willetts Borgen of the Norwegian National Trust persuaded me to visit the government quarter in Oslo to see the Y-Block.

As a student in the 1960s I had modernism thrust down my throat, and when I graduated from the Edinburgh College of Art I never wanted to hear of 'Corb & Mies' ever again. Since then, what I have learned about the problems of rusting steel and algal staining on unprotected concrete and stone cladding has increased my scepticism about the durability of much modern construction. I don't think new buildings should be photographed for architectural magazines until they are at least twenty years old!

While I have come to enjoy much pre-modern work of the early 20th century – William Emerson's Victoria Memorial in Calcutta and some of the wonderful Art Deco work in India, for example – I still find most modernism hard to

like. The work of I M Pei in Washington and Qatar and nearer home, Richard Murphy's Carlo Scarpa-inspired work in Edinburgh are among the exceptions. I don't think I have ever fallen in love with an office block before. But Erling Viksjø's astonishingly beautiful building, combined with his adjacent high-rise block seem to work in a way that most British attempts to do the same thing simply don't. Argyle House beneath Edinburgh Castle, whose demolition few will lament, comes to mind.

Why (apart from its mural by Pablo Picasso and Carl Nesjar) do I admire the Y-Block so much? I cannot comment on how well it knits in with the surrounding fabric of the city, but as a free-standing work of architecture, its shape, its scale and its proportions give it a sense of calm repose beside its standing neighbour. The 'naturbetong' exposed aggregate concrete that Viksjø devised with Sverre Jystad, and which inspired Picasso and Nesjar, looks well. Almost as important, the building is so well detailed that it shows little of the staining and weathering that destroys the appearance of so many modern buildings. It would be a tragedy for Norway and for the history of world architecture if it were to be demolished.

**Erling Viksjø's Y-block  
(1969) in Oslo's  
government quarter**

## Saving the Y-block

Last year C20 wrote formally to support the local campaign to save Viksjø's building

### Part of our letter

C20 Society urges the Norwegian Cabinet to reconsider the proposed demolition of the Y-block by Erling Viksjø. We regard it as a major work of C20 architecture of international significance, for the architectural quality of the building itself, and for the murals by Picasso on its facade and in its lobby. It also makes a very positive contribution to the diverse cityscape around it.

Erling Viksjø was a distinguished architect with a particular expertise in working with reinforced concrete, and in pioneering decorative concrete finishes in the post-war

**Picasso's mural  
'The Fishermen' on the  
Y-block's street facade**

period. Working with the engineer Sverre Jystad, he co-invented a material and process known as Naturbetong which was patented in 1955. This allowed drawings to be inscribed on both interior and exterior fair-faced concrete surfaces at a monumental scale by very carefully controlled sandblasting. He was the first recipient of the prestigious Betongtavlen award from the National Association of Norwegian Architects and the Norwegian Concrete Association. He received this honour twice, in 1961 for his Bakkehaugen Church and in 1963 for Tromsø Bridge.

We appreciate that the terrorist attacks of July 2011 remain very current in Norwegian consciousness, but we do not feel that this difficult issue is best addressed by

demolition. Restoration is possible, Picasso's artworks have both survived intact, and concerns about the vulnerability of the roadway beneath part of the building could be addressed by sensitive interventions which themselves could facilitate future use.

In London, security concerns after 9/11 led to the consideration of major alterations and possible demolition of Eero Saarinen's US Embassy building. Nevertheless, we put it forward for listing in 2007, and were very pleased that it was listed at Grade II. The final result has been very satisfactory. There is now a new US Embassy at a different location, where there is space to address security issues, and the Saarinen building will shortly open as a hotel designed by David Chipperfield. It will have a beneficial

reuse (allowing public access) and the new Embassy has helped to revitalise a previously little-visited part of the city.

Demolition of the Y-block would represent the loss of a highly significant cultural asset.

Relocating the murals would not be sufficient, given their crucial relationship to the public realm, and the Picasso murals in the adjacent Highrise building (1958). We understand that both the Y-block and Highrise were scheduled for listing in 2011, and urge you to consider confirming listing now.

We also urge you to seek beneficial reuse of the building, for government purposes or otherwise. It would be tragic if it was not preserved for future generations to appreciate and enjoy.



### Update from Siri Hoem

After the Norwegian cabinet's 2014 decision to demolish the Y-block, and the completion of the new government quarter zoning plan in 2017, an application to demolish was submitted by Nordic Architects last December. The justification for demolition is based on the alleged security risk, due to a road passing underneath.

In January the National Trust of Norway objected, pointing out deficiencies in the planning process. Preservation has not been considered as an alternative (as required by the Planning and Building Act) and no environmental impact analysis of demolition and reconstruction has been carried out. The advice of the heritage authorities has been ignored.

The demolition application has resulted in a new wave of protests, and a letter from ICOMOS (the international body advising UNESCO on World Heritage sites). If demolition is approved, the National Trust of Norway will appeal against the decision. See a new short film about the campaign at [tinyurl.com/Y-blockfilm](http://tinyurl.com/Y-blockfilm)

Previous spread: Dextra Photo. This spread: Pinterest; Nationalmuseet Oslo; Dextra Photo; John East

## What to see in Oslo

We hope to run a C20 trip to the city next year. Birgitte Sauge and Siri Hoem suggest some C20 highlights to look out for



was part of a new private suburban development on the slopes of Vettakollen, with fine views of the Oslo fjord. The row of three semi-detached houses was designed by Arne Korsmo in line with post-war ideas to replace the detached single-family house with dwellings grouped in clusters. Korsmo was perhaps influenced by the Schindler houses in Los Angeles he saw on a US trip.

### Bakkehaugen kirke

Ove Bang and Erling Viksjø, 1959  
A 1938 competition was won by Ove Bang, but building was delayed by WWII. In 1958, it resumed with modifications by Y-block designer Erling Viksjø. The triangular form (above left) recalls traditional Norwegian wooden churches. The interior has fine murals by Kai Fjell and Carl Nesjar, made in sandblasted natural concrete and coloured glass.

### Villa Schreiner

Sverre Fehn, 1963  
This house for the economist Per Schreiner is single-storey, built of pine, brick and concrete. The walls are not load-bearing, and it recalls Japanese houses with its sliding doors and glass within a natural setting.

### St Hallvard church and monastery

Lund & Slaatto, 1966  
This massive square brick and concrete building encloses a circular church with a monastery and parish room. An unusual feature is the suspended ceiling in the form of an inverted cupola.

### 1980s

#### Rådhusgata 23B

Jan & Jon, 1986  
When post-modernism was at its peak in many parts of Europe, Norwegian architects mostly still worked in a functionalist tradition. However, there were some significant exceptions, for example this in-fill building near the City Hall by the Jan & Jon practice.

### 1920 to 1940

#### Ekeberg Restaurant

Lars Backer, 1929  
Backer was an Oslo-born architect and pioneer of modernism. He also designed the Skansen restaurant (1927), sadly demolished in 1970. The Ekeberg was originally painted brown to harmonise with the surrounding forest, but when it was restored recently (by Melby Arkitekter and Radius Design) its owner insisted on 'modernist' white.

#### Kunstnernes Hus

Gudolf Blakstad & Herman Munthe-Kaas, 1930  
The Kunstnernes Hus (or Artists' House) is still an art gallery. Blakstad and Munthe-Kaas were for several decades one of Norway's largest architects and designers. An original architect's model of the building is shown top right.

#### Rådhus

Arnstein Arneberg and Magnus Poulsson, 1931-50  
The monumental red-brick City Hall is particularly worth visiting for the sculpture, painted murals and tapestries inside and outside. The main hall, decorated by Henrik Sørensen and Alf Rolfsen, features

wall paintings of Norway and Oslo between the wars and during occupation, as well as commercial activity in the city and the rise of the labour movement (see below right).

#### Villa Stenersen

Arne Korsmo, 1939  
This house for the financier and art collector Rolf E Stenersen has been restored to its original colours and materials and is open to the public. The glass, steel and concrete facade and supporting columns show the influence of Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye (1925) and Mies van der Rohe's Villa Tugendhat (1929). The glass bricks on the first floor and over 600 glass cylinders in the roof provide filtered lighting for the art collection. Nearby is Villa Dammann (1932) in Havna Allé by Korsmo with Sverre Aasland. They designed many of the houses in this street.

#### Public housing projects

1920s housing developments in the neighbourhoods of Ullevål Hageby were inspired by British garden city projects. An early development of the OBOS housing association was the Etterstad block of 1931, often called the Etterstadslottet or Etterstad Castle. The two curved apartment blocks at Professor

Dahls gate by Frithjof Reppen (early 30s) are an example of Norwegian functionalism. In Westye Egebergs gate (Victor Schaulund, 1930) are four seven and eight storey apartment blocks built around an octagonal space and visible from large parts of the city.

### 1950 to 1970

#### Three houses at Planetveien

Arne Korsmo, 1955  
Christian Norberg-Schulz was a post-modernist theorist who as a young architect was part of Norway's modernist movement. His own house in Planetveien (no 14)

