



Urbanistica n. 124

May-August 2004

Distribution by www.planum.net

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Integrated conservation in the age of modernism: mission impossible?
Interview with Christer Bengs, by Mia Geijer

How well has integrated conservation been managed in the urban planning process of the Nordic countries? In this interview, Christer Bengs, Senior Research Fellow at Nordregio in Stockholm and Professor at the University of Technology in Helsinki, gives his view on cultural planning in the Nordic Countries.

Christer Bengs forms a severe criticism concerning the results of the management of built heritage in postwar town planning. A source of the failure is, according to Bengs, the heavy dependency on modernist ideals which still influences architects, planners and conservationists. Another reason for the massive destruction of historic city centres is the relatively late urbanization. There has never really been an urban culture to identify with in many of the Nordic towns. In postwar society, the political situation in combination with the rapid growth of industrial towns and the modern movement favoured renewal of urban centres through demolition of the symbols of the bourgeoisie traditions. Though the political goals set for preservation to day seems to be high, they are rarely met by concrete cultural planning efforts. The modern planning systems are in the hands of the real estate market and investors.

Mia Geijer: Nordregio has arranged a number of courses in integrated conservation. Through these courses you have met with many urban planners and conservators. Is there a common way of dealing with questions of preservation

planning in the Nordic countries?
Christer Bengs: The development of the process of planning is very much the same in all the Nordic countries. The previously dominating system was based on central decisions with a high degree of details. In the latest decades we have seen a development of a planning which aims at declaring overall principles in rather vague terms, for example general principles of preservation. The result of the new system is that the liberty of exploitation of the cities has increased. In my opinion the Swedish planning and building system is an example of a very liberal law in which almost anything goes. It is rather obvious that the preservation of historic buildings have suffered. Politicians are on general terms positive to public goods, such as preservation. But at the concrete level the efforts are not very long ranging. It lays with in the present times that the official language is as indefinite as possible, so that there are no obstacles to exploitation when a project is in making. Unfortunately planners give a sad picture when it comes to matters of preservation. Most planners are architects by profession, few are specially educated for their task. In the Nordic schools of architecture the modern movement have had a strong influence during a long period. In my opinion the aim of the architectural education today is to socialize the students to a common aesthetical ideal, which is not necessarily shared by the citizens at large. Questions of preservation are extremely peripheral. Further more, the planners lack sufficient training in the cultural fields which are needed to embrace the questions of preservation.

M. G.: To what extents have the conservationists managed to take part in the city planning?

C. B.: The field of integrated conservation has not been thoroughly explored until recently. Planning and preservation have worked within two different administrative sectors, each with its own traditions and ideals. Though the importance of integrated conservation should be an increasing part of the planning, it is only one among all the special interests that the planners have to administrate. The conservationists are trained to think in terms of monuments and classification of cultural values. They view the single buildings of the planning area separately and rank them as very valuable, valuable and valueless buildings instead of treating them as meaningful environments. A typical statement from the cultural management administration in a planning process is a list of single buildings of cultural value. We just have to look at what have happened to many Swedish towns to see the disastrous results of the grading systems.

From my experience the Danish system, which is the most conservative, with a rather high degree of central planning, is working well from a preservational point of view. The Danish planners are often initiated in these matters. We also have to recognise that the urbanisation process and town morphology are important to how well preserved the cities are. Denmark was the first Nordic country to be urbanised and there is a great number of medieval towns. The medieval town pattern with narrow and deep grounds tends to be hard to exploit on a grand scale. The Finnish towns, on the other hand, with their

vast grid system and large grounds, have been easily adapted to the modernist ideals and large blocks.

M. G.: The Norwegian trade agglomerations on the Scandinavian west coast are also characterized by their fine scale morphology. Is it for the same reason that they are relatively well preserved?

C. B.: Not necessarily. In Finland the autonomy in 1917 was a victory of the Finnish-speaking majority. They did not identify with the Russian town pattern, the Swedish bourgeoisie living in the towns and the buildings that was connected to the foreign rulers. Instead the Finns identified with the modern heroic architecture that represented the future. The urbanization in Finland mainly occurred in the postwar period. There was a need for new dwellings and public service in the urban areas. Modernist buildings were suitable for manifesting the new era. In Norway, which became independent in 1905, there was a genuine Norwegian urban building tradition, which had never been oppressed by another ethnic group. The Norwegians have taken pride in their built heritage because they can identify with it.

M. G.: A number of towns have been through periods of fast economical growth: how does this affect the urban development and preservation of historic environments?

C. B.: I do believe that the same rate of exploitation often would have been possible if the planners had been open to continue the growth by continuing with the same low, wooden buildings, in a similar pattern as the old structures. I think that the case is that the politicians and planners want the new

building types as symbols of the modern times. When efforts to preserve have been made, it is rather obvious that the success of preservation is proportional to the economic importance of the planned investment. It is much easier to enforce preservation when it comes to private, small scale objects than when large enterprises are ready to invest.

The planning systems of the Nordic countries are emphasizing on participation of the citizens in the planning process. To what extent can ordinary towns people in our countries influence preservation in the planning process?

The postwar demolitions have been justified by pointing out the disadvantages of the existing built environment. The old buildings were regarded as unhealthy, hazardous or whatever was suitable to motivate their destruction, this was irrefutable. The main argument for town renewal in the postwar period has been hygienic reasons. The majority of people are conservative when it comes to changes in their neighbourhood. The democratic process in the Nordic countries is working in ways that means that the opinion of the people is not really asked for when it comes to important matters. If a large investment is at stake, the planners will not take the risk to ask the people what they think of the actual matter until very late in the process. The newly issued Finnish law on planning and building is an example. The invitation to participate comes at a rather late stage, when the investment deals are already made. Sometimes not even the politicians are informed.

M. G.: In European urban planning during the last

decades there has been attention given to the phenomenon of gentrification, is this a problem in our countries and is there a difference in preservational status due to different forms of ownerships?

C. B.: In the town centre of Helsinki the real estate prices are the double compared to peripheral locations. This means that rich people gradually have moved into the city centre while the less fortunate have moved out. This is due to the real estate market. The houses that contain apartments are organised as tenant owned companies. The apartments are sold on the open market, without restrictions. The prices are completely submitted to the market laws. There is a correlation between interest rates and the price of dwellings. In Sweden blocks of apartments that have been controlled by public housing companies are being transferred to the system of tenant-owner societies. Depending on the legal organizations of these societies, this might be an advantage when it comes to preservation. If there is a system with majority decisions, it will be harder to make agreements of exploitations.

The large public housing societies have not been inclined to work in ways of preservation. Their decision making have been on a higher level, disregarding the individual buildings. The construction of centrally located post-war apartment buildings has been preceded by demolitions of historically valuable environments and objects. The public housing companies have in fact been one large source of demolition in Swedish citycenters. Another has been the department stores. During the 1960s and 1970s the politicians in numerous

Swedish cities made deals with the cooperative movement and the private retail enterprises. They were given one central ground each to build their department stores on. The houses that already existed were demolished.

M. G.: Finally, is it possible to identify an ideological superstructure when it comes to preservation among the Nordic city planners and conservationists?

C. B.: In the view of the heritage management sector the main opponents are identified as architects. There is a belief that the conservationists and architects embrace two different ideological and ethical points of departures. But if we look into any of the documents issued by the heritage boards of the Nordic countries, we will find that they are entirely influenced by the modernist movement. In other words, deep down the ideologies are the same among the conservationists as among architects.

When dealing with the past, the modernist view of the history is inherited from the Romantic Movement. We may call this historicism. The history is regarded as a process of development. Each time has its own special features, a "zeitgeist". The job of the conservator is to make sure that some remains of each time is preserved. It is not the objects that are to be conserved, it is rather the objects as pedagogic illustrations of the historic development that should be secured. In the long run, this means that each time will be represented by a certain stylistic model. When it comes to our own time, the preferred aesthetical ideal is the modernism. It is therefore a virtue among the officers of heritage management to demand modernist features

when it comes to adding new structures in historical environments. There may be a sense in regarding history in this way but it is out of range when it means that experts, such as architects and conservationists dictate ethical and aesthetical matters. It has led to a conservation of the modernist ideal. We still build the same boxes of glass today as we did 80 years ago.

Instead we could learn from the previous thousand years of Nordic urbanization. This would give a broader range of morphological and formalistic possibilities for urban development. Matters of preservation could be ruled through economical support systems and better management. A good law is merely a "paper dragon" if it is not implemented in a sensible way. Finally preservation is very much a matter of cultural views in society, in a cultivated country the historic environment is not necessarily abused.