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### **The Architect of the Party: Torbjørn Rodahl and “Good” Norwegian Architecture**

“It is an experience to hear architect Torbjørn Rodahl speak both against the city planning authorities and his brothers in the profession,” remarked Norwegian journalist Jon Kojen in an opening of a 1965 *Arbeiderbladet* article titled “Architects and Politicians.”<sup>1</sup> In a lengthy interview-cum-spiritual proclamation, the 39-year-old architect made enemies both left and right: he called out his colleagues—architects and planners, but also developers and entrepreneurs, conservative and labour politicians, financial decision-makers and municipal authorities. Rodahl labelled post-war housing developments as “hopeless” and “soulless,” akin to “concentration camps,” in which only the “barbed wire was missing.”<sup>2</sup> This harsh and dramatic critique was equally directed against the profit-seeking construction businesses and pillar institutions of the post-war Norwegian welfare state and ignited a scandal of national proportions. So why was a Leftist architect criticising the political establishment given so much space in the main newspaper of the Norwegian Labour Party? What prompted a young, up-and-coming architect to break so many unspoken social codes, and what was the endgame of his crusade? After all, although poignant, the critique was overdramatised: as architectural historian Mari Hvattum noted, Norway in the 1950s had “hardly witnessed many crass examples of soul-destroying satellite towns.”<sup>3</sup>

Rodahl’s attack on Norwegian housing planning politics added oil to the fire of the especially flammable conditions of 1965 Norwegian politics, as the September parliamentary elections hinged on the question of housing provision. In what came to be known as the “bidding war,” the Conservative coalition won over the promise of the Labour Party, ending a half-a-century political hegemony of the Norwegian Left.<sup>4</sup> Architectural discussion about the “good” design unfolded in the popular press and played a central role

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<sup>1</sup> *Arbeiderbladet*, 30 November 1965, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Mari Hvattum, “Nordic Monumentality” in *Nordic Journal of Architecture*, no 2 (2012): 9.

<sup>4</sup> Elsa Reiersen et al., *De tusen hjem: Den norske stats husbank 1946-96* (Oslo: Ad notam Gyldendal, 1996), 210–11.

in the 1965 political debate, as terms like “aesthetics of environment” were mobilised against both the right- and left-wing interests of the political spectrum. Architect Torbjørn Rodahl, on his way to becoming “the” architect of the Labour Party, was both an instrument and an actor in this process, shaping his professional and political trajectory along the political-aesthetic debate.

### **Against Developers & Bureaucrats**

Torbjørn Rodahl was born in Brønnoysund, north Norway in 1926. He studied architecture at the Norwegian Technical University in Trondheim and, after graduating in the early 1950s, founded an Oslo office together with a colleague, Paul Cappelen, whom he met while working on the defence ministry construction projects.<sup>5</sup> The architectural practice was successful from the start, with Rodahl winning a series of smaller competitions in 1953 and the duo receiving a large commission for the Skedsmo town hall—a suburb of Oslo—in 1954. A significant public project extensively featured in *Byggekunst*, the main architectural magazine in the country, Skedsmo town hall put the office on the architectural map of Norway.<sup>6</sup> Substantial commissions followed soon, including high schools, town halls, community houses, and swimming pools.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the 1950s, the architects worked with a range of municipal politicians and decision-makers, developing, for example, a prototype for a “system-school”—a Norwegian analogue of the British CLASP building system for schools based on prefabricated industrially-produced elements.<sup>8</sup>

In the interviews and lectures on school construction, Rodahl’s preoccupation with the economy of construction and the formative role of the built environment became increasingly apparent.<sup>9</sup> However, despite Rodahl being outspoken on the subject of “good”

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<sup>5</sup> *Aktuell* 21, no. 8 (1965): 26-29.

<sup>6</sup> *Helgelands Arbeiderblad*, 12 July 1954, p.2. *Akershus*, 24 November 1954, p. 1. See “Skedsmo rådhus,” no. 2, vol 40 (1958): 42-47.

<sup>7</sup> Early projects included Skedsmo Herredshus (1954), Narvik høyere almen skole (1955), Nordkapprestauranten (1956), Oppegård skole (1957), Norges Tekniske Høgskoles aula (1959), Nordkapphallen (1959), Molde rådhus (1961), Grimstad Tekniske skole (1969), Krigsskolen på Linderud (1970) and SAS hotels in Bodø and Bærum.

<sup>8</sup> *Helgeland Arbeiderblad*, 15 June 1965, p.1; *Aura Avis*, 5 October 1965; *Arbeiderbladet*, 14 February 1968, p.4.

<sup>9</sup> See *Glåmdalen*, 14 April 1959, p.1, *Rogalands Avis*, 15 April 1959, p. 5, *Arbeiderbladet*, 15 April 1959, p. 7. VG, 19 June 1962, p. 2. *Adresseavisen*, 22 February 1963, p. 9. For aspects of “mentality change” reflected in school design see Kaare Fostervoll, *Mot rikare mål: den norske folkehøgskulen 1864-1964* (Oslo: Noregs høgskulelærarlag/Noregs boklag, 1964).

design, his crusade around “environmental design” did not fully unfold until January 1965, nine months ahead of the parliamentary elections. As an aspiring politician, in his critique, Rodahl effectively mobilised images of crisis. One of the largest articles on the subject appeared in the February issue of *Aktuell*, a popular Norwegian magazine connected with the workers’ movement. In the article, Rodahl claimed that social housing was akin to “barracks” with a “hopeless Kafka-esque feeling,” where “all human life and connections were lost.”<sup>10</sup> These descriptions were amplified by images of new housing blocks set against the empty four-lane highways and deserted snowy staircases connecting new developments.<sup>11</sup> In another rhetorical move, Rodahl singled out housewives and children as the main victims of these soulless surroundings, as busy traffic lanes posed a danger to children’s safety while housewives grew increasingly depressed. “Hopelessness and greyness scream at you. Blocks, row houses and single houses are scattered carelessly over bare land. People are thrown together in a shack-like slum,”—continued Rodahl in another take.<sup>12</sup> Who was to blame?

Rodahl’s number one target was engineer Olav Selvaag, an active conservative and the head of one of the largest concrete construction companies in Norway, Ringnes & Selvaag. Selvaag experimented with low-cost housing both in timber and concrete, but his conservative politics earned him much disfavour from both the architectural and political circles in post-war Norway.<sup>13</sup> In the mid-1950s, Ringnes & Selvaag received a large commission for more than 700 apartments in what came to be known as the Veitvedt development. The project was already severely criticised in the drawing stage both by the Oslo Labour Party politicians and the architectural union.<sup>14</sup> Rodahl’s critique of Selvaag’s development was then not new and was also directed against the municipal authorities who made a deal with the engineer. For Rodahl, however, this was an opportunity to hammer his point home: Veitvedt was the epitome of bad planning practice, “a grotesque example of bad housing decisions.”<sup>15</sup> The main problem, as Rodahl argued, lay in the profit-driven

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<sup>10</sup> *Aktuell*, vol. 21, no. 8 (1965): 26-29.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Sarpen*, 29 September, 1965, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> On Olav Selvaag and his housing enterprise see Jon Skeie, *Bolig for folk flest: Selvaagbygg 1920-1998* (Oslo: Tano Aschehoug, 1998). Harald Utter, *Boligbygger: Selvaag 1920-1982* (Oslo: Forlaget Press, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Utter, *Boligbygger*, 146–64.

<sup>15</sup> *Moss Dagblad*, 17 January 1966, p.1.

mindset of private developers, which represented business interests and the privatisation of the established welfare housing system. Another problem was in the “narrow-minded technical arrogance,” where decisions were driven by the optimisation of square meters without any consideration of the lived experience of the buildings. People were stuck as “rabbits in cages on top of each other,” while areas like “Veitvedt “will stand forever as a national shame.”<sup>16</sup>

While dramatic, this critique, once again, was not new, as similar concerns over housing developments which were “outdated” even before they were produced were raised by PAGON, the Norwegian chapter of CIAM, as early as 1952.<sup>17</sup> The group was equally concerned with the “soulless” constraining environments of the modernist satellite towns driven by the pursuit of technical and economic optimisation and evoked images of “guinea pigs” to critique the homogenising institutions of the post-war welfare state.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Rodahl’s critique did not stop at the business interests and went against the state institutions responsible for housing production, like Husbanken, the Norwegian Housing Bank, and large para-statal housing cooperatives, like OBOS (*Oslo Bolig of Sparelag*).<sup>19</sup> Although Rodahl was convinced that housing cooperatives were to constitute the backbone of housing production, bureaucrats and technocrats of OBOS and Husbanken were complacent in the construction of cheap, “mindless” housing since they only cared about affordability. In their zeal for pragmatic optimisation, they “have gotten rid of any environmentally conscious elements,” turning from a “social weapon” into “a large, ugly wolf.”<sup>20</sup>

This critique of the pillar institutions of the post-war welfare state, established by the Labour Party and the politicians that were in charge of it, is particularly interesting, as it pre-empted the Conservating critique of the Labour housing politics. It also offered a convenient out for Labour politicians who pushed the responsibility over bad housing onto executive

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<sup>16</sup> *Finmark Dagblad*, 22 March, 1966, p. 6. *Sarpen*, 29 September, 1965, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> PAGON stood for Progressive arkitekters gruppe Oslo Norge, see more at “Vi vil slutte oss til,” *Byggekunst* 34, no.6-7 (1952): XVI.

<sup>18</sup> *Byggekunst*, 6-7 (1952): 93, 109.

<sup>19</sup> On the history of Husbanken and its role see Knut Selberg and Vegard Hagerup, *Husbanken former Norge: Den norske stats husbank: innflytelse på arkitektur og tettstedsutvikling 1946-1980* (Norges tekniske høgskole. Institutt for by- og regionplanlegging, Trondheim, 1981). On OBOS see Per Nestor and OBOS, *Boligpolitikken og OBOS gjennom 50 år (1929-1979)* (Oslo: OBOS, 1979).

<sup>20</sup> *Aktuell*, vol. 21, no. 8 (1965): 26-29.

bodies, reframing it from a political into an organisational problem.<sup>21</sup> In addition, Rodahl's criticism could also be read as a political warning to the old political Labour establishment, which got a little too comfortable with an elaborate system of corporatist alliances. A crude attack against developers and entrepreneurs—a warning to the Conservative coalition—cast a convenient shadow to criticise the Labour elites, who lost (or were about to lose) the parliamentary elections. For Rodahl, this attack was a platform from which he could jumpstart his own political campaign and launch a cultural “offensive.” Abstract terms like “environment” and “aesthetics” proved particularly handy in the political debate.

### **An “Environmental” Approach**

For Rodahl, housing was both a political and a social problem, and to solve it, both the rational and aesthetic perspectives had to be considered.<sup>22</sup> “Good” Norwegian architecture was to create humane environments where people could thrive, and the environment was to have socially “shaping” and “activating” powers.<sup>23</sup> Rodahl's aesthetic program focused specifically on concepts like *miljø*—roughly translating to “environment,” and *trivsel*—“joy.” New “environmental politics” were to account for both social and natural aspects and create opportunities for work, leisure and education for all. “Good” architecture was to create not only “houses but societies” based on aesthetic principles.<sup>24</sup> To do so, Rodahl suggested, planning had to be expanded beyond the narrow-minded technical expertise and include humanists, artists, psychologists and sociologists.<sup>25</sup>

Although this totalising approach reminds of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century *Gesamtkunstwerk*, it undoubtedly drew on Bauhaus's explorations of the totality of artistic environments and Gropius's ruminations on the role of the architect. Gropius's influential article discussing the role of the architect in the post-war world was published in *Byggekunst* in 1952, and many of Rodahl's thoughts on the role of artistic professionals and “thinking in relationships” are

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<sup>21</sup> Guttorm Ruud further explores this shift in political responsibility in his PhD, see Guttorm Ruud, ‘Sites of Crisis: Histories of the Satellite Town’ (PhD Diss., The Oslo School of Architecture and Design, 2021), 78.

<sup>22</sup> *Moss Dagblad*, 17 January 1966, p.1.

<sup>23</sup> *Arbeiderbladet*, 24 September 1965, p. 20.

<sup>24</sup> *Arbeiderbladet*, 20 January 1965, p. 1, 10.

<sup>25</sup> *Arbeiderbladet*, 24 September 1965, p. 20.

paralleled in Gropius's 1956 lecture "Apollo in the Democracy."<sup>26</sup> A representative of the first post-war generation, Rodahl was undoubtedly familiar with the critique of late modernism, which placed too much attention on purely technological solutions. For Rodahl, technology could be tamed for "humanist" ends, as it could provide flexible and customisable solutions within large projects.<sup>27</sup> Rodahl was particularly inspired by the work of Alvar Aalto, who, he believed, managed to produce a totality of architectural whole by integrating inspiration from nature, traditional materials and new construction methods.<sup>28</sup>

Practically, municipalities were to be responsible for creating these "totalising" environments, strengthened by the expertise of humanists, artists, sociologists, and poets.<sup>29</sup> Land procurement systems had to be changed so that municipalities could acquire large land plots. They were also to drive an "advertisements campaign" for "common dwellers" to understand the value "of good form and good environments."<sup>30</sup> Rodahl did not see an implicit homogenisation issue with such a "totalising" environmental approach: to him, large housing developments produced with standardised construction methods and informed by the expertise of a wide range of artistic professionals were enough to overcome the shortcomings of the existing projects, create new "humanist" forms and bring more social equality. Although interested in a new type of social relations, Rodahl was nevertheless unfazed by the implicit paternalistic approach of such totalising "aesthetics." Rodahl's advocacy for total planning was, in a way, a leftist alternative to the "total planning" approach advocated by Selvaag, where the entire responsibility was delegated to one developer.

Two of Rodahl's unrealised projects illustrate the pitfalls of this ambitious but hardly implementable ideology. In 1966, amidst his media campaign, Rodahl participated in the development of the idea sketch for Vestveggen—a large housing development project to be located on the steep rocky west coast of Nesodden, an island in the Oslo fjord. The project sketches show pixelated massive clusters of smaller, interconnected units reminiscent of the

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<sup>26</sup> Walter Gropius and Ise Gropius, *Apollo in the Democracy; the Cultural Obligation of the Architect* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1968), 4–8.

<sup>27</sup> Radio og Fjernsyn, *Programbladet*, 29 August–4 September, 1965.

<sup>28</sup> See Rodahl's references to Aalto in the interview in *Arbeiderbladet*, 30 November 1965, p. 13.

<sup>29</sup> *Norges Handels og Sjøfartstidende*, August 6, 1966, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Sarpen*, 29 September, 1965, p. 5.

late-1960s structuralist MAT buildings.<sup>31</sup> In the project, the architects adapted the then-popular atrium-house typology to a mass-housing development with a series of stepping terraced row houses, walkable streets and private terraces.<sup>32</sup> With extensive views of the fjord and limited traffic, the project was to rely on the new construction techniques as houses were assembled on site, providing safe space for children and overall holistic environments with views of the fjord. However, as the eerily empty streets in the project sketches betray, the inwards-oriented terrace-house typology hardly encouraged any public life or community-shaping activities. Rather, they were far closer to the abstract bourgeois “ideal villa house” developed by Cappelen and Rodahl roughly at the same time.<sup>33</sup> Elevated on pilotis and set within abstract greenery, this inward-oriented villa-house was decisively non-urban—although promoted as the most appropriate alternative solution by Rodahl.

This disinterest in the urban and the social from the architect who advocated for “stimulating” surroundings is particularly visible in another unrealised project for an “ideal suburb” designed by Cappelen and Rodahl. The ideal “satellite town” was to house 7,000 people, divided into five walled-out “pockets” or neighbourhoods connected to the suburb’s centre. Its centre was dominated by high-rise typologies and communal facilities—shopping centres, businesses and schools—while the density gradually decreased further into the “pockets,” from high-rise apartment blocks to two- and single-storey row housing.<sup>34</sup> Traffic roads encircled the “pockets,” lending the model the conventional modernist “towers in the park” atmosphere. Civic spaces, however, were not featured, and opportunities for any public life remained overlooked beyond bland, unprogrammed green areas. These two examples of “ideal housing” show that despite radical claims for an entirely different, socially-shaping environment, Cappelen and Rodahl’s projects hardly lived up to the hefty promises. In a grander scheme of things, their proposals for housing estates were not that different from other large developments planned in Norway and Scandinavia at the time. Rodahl, in particular, seemed uncritical of the inevitable homogenising effect and social problems of any large housing venture.

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<sup>31</sup> See a later description of a MAT building in Alison Smithson, “How to Recognize and Read Mat-Building: Mainstream Architecture as It Developed Towards the Mat-building,” *Architectural Design*, 9 (1974), 573-590.

<sup>32</sup> See “Vestveggen,” in *Byggekunst*, vol. 49, no. 6 (1967): 164-165.

<sup>33</sup> See “Morgendagens Boligmiljø,” a project description by Torbjørn Rodahl, *Programbladet* 19, no. 36 (1965), p. 13. It was also a part of the conversation which aired on the radio on 31 August 1965, 11:35.

<sup>34</sup> *Aktuell* 21, no. 8 (1965): 26-29.

## Good Politics

What was the long-term legacy of Rodahl's crude media campaign? Despite its ardency, the crusade was short-lived: Rodahl's name peaks with 1250+ newspaper mentions in the 1960s, compared to 224 in the previous decade, to quickly decline in the 1970s.<sup>35</sup> Within that time, most mentions date to 1965, proving that Rodahl's campaign was undoubtedly a political instrument tied to the parliamentary elections. However, despite the instrumentality, Rodahl managed to make a name for himself and carve new political opportunities, heading the "Rodahl-committee" on culture in 1967 and being on the board of the Norwegian Culture Council.<sup>36</sup> It is possible that Rodahl's risqué critique of both the conservative currents and the old Labour establishment kept his name afloat in the political circle and earned the office new commissions. After Knut Knutsen's death in 1969, Rodahl, not Knutsen's son, took over the informal title of "the architect of the Labour Party."<sup>37</sup> In the 1970s, for example, the office of Cappelen and Rodahl was commissioned to build schools for a large Nordic school project in Tanzania, showcasing the achievements of "good" Norwegian design abroad.

In the long term, Rodahl's critique of Norwegian housing developments paved the way for the infamous Ammerud report, a daunting critique of another post-war housing development built by Haakon Mjeva. The report— a watershed moment in Norwegian housing—borrowed much of the rhetorical and visual language from Rodahl's media campaign. Similar to Rodahl, its authors—architects Anne Sæterdal and Thorbjørn Hansen—were a part of the more radical socialist circles, and their politics informed much of architectural criticism.<sup>38</sup> However, similar to Rodahl's critique, these broad statements were nearly impossible to implement in practice. Any large housing development project would ultimately face problems of homogenisation and social cohesion, and an entirely new

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<sup>35</sup> See OCR search of "Torbjørn Rodahl" in Norwegian newspaper sources returns with 224 mentions between 1950-1959, 1252 for 1960-1969, and 193 for 1970-1979. See nb.no.

<sup>36</sup> *Morgenbladet*, 4 November 1967, p.1. Nils Øye, *Skippingen av Norsk Kulturfond* (Bergen: Forfatteren, 1980), 160.

<sup>37</sup> Kåre Bulie, "Den siste modernist," *Arkitektnytt*, no.3 (2020), <https://www.arkitektnytt.no/nyheter/den-siste-modernist>. Accessed May 2022.

<sup>38</sup> Both Sæterdal and Hansen were a part of the socialist architect group *Kanal*. Guttorm Ruud, 'Sites of Crisis: Histories of the Satellite Town,' 60. For Kanal references see Jan Carlsen, 'Kanal-historien 1. Drømmen om Nye Byggekunst', *Arkitektnytt*, no. 1 (1992): 7. For more political context, also see Martin Braathen, "The Magician and the Shoemaker - Debates on Open Form and Marxist-Leninism in Norway around 1970" (PhD Diss., NTNU, 2019).



approach to housing required a radical rethinking of all cultural conditions—something that only the post-1968 generation of architects could offer.