

Maryia Rusak, PhD

YIG Prep Pro Junior Research Fellow 2024-2026

Professorship of Architecture Theory

Institute for Architectural Design, Art and Theory

Karlsruhe Institute of Technology

maryia.rusak@kit.edu

www.maryiarusak.com

Being Single in a Perfect Society: Lessons from the 1960s Housing Projects of the Norwegian Singles' Association

“Four chairs set around a dining table offer an image of a single person sitting around with good friends, while good smells are coming from the stove and a nice dessert is taken out of the fridge,”—wrote a Norwegian journalist in April 1967, documenting the visit to a “showroom” apartment in a freshly completed housing complex for single people in Oslo, Norway. Furnished by Steen & Strøm, a Norwegian high-end department store, the apartment was set up as part of the publicity campaign to draw attention to the advocacy work of the Norwegian Single Association behind the project’s construction. With a seemingly frivolous name—Single’s Association—the group nevertheless worked relentlessly to defend the rights of the demographics most overlooked in a society geared towards statistically average family units. The association’s efforts extended from aspects of taxation and health insurance to the cadence of the Protestant liturgy. Nevertheless, its political struggle found its most tangible embodiment in the fight for one of the main pillars of post-war Norwegian welfare—housing.

This paper then briefly charts the Norwegian Singles Association’s fight for new housing typologies, reflected in an avalanche of articles, opinion pieces, interviews, and debates covered in the local and regional press. The outspoken position of the Single Association both exposes the many political cleavages of the bureaucratic landscape of the post-war Norwegian welfare state and offers new insight into how political pressures shape everyday spaces. Interested in the non-so-obvious political alliances forged by the Association and the evolving demands placed on different political actors, the paper explores different building projects constructed for single people in 1960s Norway and suggests some potential insights for the contemporary “single epidemic” housing market.

The Silent Child

Post-war Norwegian politics could be characterised by what some call “the hegemonic” rule of the Norwegian Labour Party—*Arbeiderpartiet*—in charge of reconstructing post-war welfare state institutions, which assured equal pay and access to healthcare, education, and, most importantly—housing. However, the strength of the totalising welfare politics catered to the “greatest number” also contained its weakness, as some social groups remained overlooked. Among these were the single people—the “silent child” of Norwegian society, pushed aside from the intense spotlight of the post-war ideology of domestic bliss focused on a couple with young children. However, with increasing modernisation of post-war Norway, subsequent migration and urbanisation, the number of single people steadily grew, particularly in urban centres. By some estimates, in the 1960s, in a country of 3,5 million people, approximately 550,000 were single. Nevertheless, since this was a generic—and precarious—characteristic, Norwegian single people remained politically unorganised.

This all changed in May 1957, when the Norwegian Single Association was formed with Audhild Scheie as the managing director and Alfild Brevig, a theologian and a school inspector, as her deputy.¹ The Association's main goal was to advocate for the rights and interests of single people. Second, it provided a sense of community and opportunities to build new social connections. The most pressing issues on the agenda were taxation, health and job security benefits, and, most importantly, housing. Despite paying nearly 33% of all “personal” taxes in Norway, single people received only 0,7% of all housing loans, while their housing conditions were the most problematic.²

In the post-war period, Norway suffered from severe material shortages, and rationing laws were introduced to alleviate resource competition. In Oslo, the Housing Distribution Law enacted in June 1950 introduced the “room norms”—one room per person—which made it impossible for single people to rent an apartment, and small flats were scarce.³ As a solution, single people could rent a part of somebody's property or live in a shared arrangement. This meant little or limited access to the washroom or kitchen for the majority and no private WC. In the older housing stock, the rental rooms were placed in the

¹ *Porsgrunns Dagblad*, 23 May 1957, p. 5.

² *Vårt Land*, 2 September 1965, p. 6.

³ Brevig, *Enslig i dagens samfunn*, 69.

“leftover” spaces hardly fit for habitation—in the attic or the basement—and, consequently, had limited light, ventilation and access.⁴ Such living arrangements were both physically and psychologically demanding. While this was supposed to be a temporary provision to alleviate the housing pressures of the immediate reconstruction period, the situation did not improve eight years later, now added with social stigma. In 1958, for example, the Oslo Rental Office made it clear that to get inscribed on the waiting list, “house seekers have to be married or engaged.”⁵ Single people could not expect to rent an apartment in the city.

For all new construction, loans were administered by a new entity—*Husbanken*—the Norwegian Housing Bank. The bank provided up to 90% of all costs for new housing construction, given that it complied with the centrally established regulations of minimum and maximum space provision per person.⁶ However, although an institution conceived to make house ownership available to all—for example, one did not have to go through a strict credit evaluation, and the interest rates were extremely low—the “statistically” average calculations of square meters per person made very few apartments eligible for single people. Moreover, while in 1947, *Husbanken* introduced cost write-offs for families with several children, similar measures were refused to single-person households: “*Husbanken* will not subsidise apartments occupied by single people. If the person does not intend to get married, the write-down contribution will be waived.”⁷ From *Husbanken*’s point of view, single people were a “relatively homogeneous demographics which should be in good condition to pay higher mortgage payments.”⁸

This was far from the truth: single people came from all walks of life and social demographics.⁹ Nevertheless, aspects of gender, age and social class played a strong modifying role. As a 1965 survey among the Association members revealed, 98% were women, 2/3 were unmarried, and 95% were older than 50. The majority belonged to a working or lower-middle-class background, working as teachers, nurses, shop attendants and office clerks earning an equivalent of 50 to 75 pounds a month.¹⁰ 70% lived in some

⁴ Brevig, *Enslig i dagens samfunn*, 74.

⁵ Brevig, *Enslig i dagens samfunn*.

⁶ Much more on housing regulations from *Husbanken* see in Elsa Reiersen et al., *De tusen hjem: Den norske stats husbank 1946-96* (Oslo: Ad notam Gyldendal, 1996).

⁷ Brevig, *Enslig i dagens samfunn*, 71.

⁸ Brevig, *Enslig i dagens samfunn*, 73.

⁹ Brevig, *Enslig i dagens samfunn*, 10.

¹⁰ *Norges Kvinner*, 25 October 1963, p.2.

shared arrangement and wanted to improve their housing conditions. In short, the perfect society was not so perfect for some. Most single people were women who worked hard in caretaking roles their entire lives, and their needs also had to be taken care of.

Against the Society

“The individual has a weak place in Norwegian society,” maintained Alfild Brevig, one of the most outspoken activists in the association. Indeed, to see a change, a political organisation was necessary, and if all single people in Norway joined ranks, it would surpass the Labour Party by headcount. From its foundation, the Single Association effectively captured the momentum of the parliamentary electoral campaigns to bring the problems of single people to the forefront. For example, in October 1957, the Association organised a large political meeting at the Sentrum Cinema in Oslo, with an audience surpassing 600. Held a month ahead of pending parliamentary elections, the meeting gathered representatives of each political party, each furnished ahead with questions related to single people’s problems. This set-up revealed unexpected political alliances: the individual-centred agenda of the Association aligned with the interests of centrist and conservative parties, providing a platform to critique the current politics of the Labour Party. Helge Seip, a future Minister of the Local Government under a more conservative coalition of 1965, championed the issues of the Association in the Parliament.

Most notably, Seip led the first parliamentary “interpellation,” which forced Husbanken to issue new recommendations for housing loans for single people. In 1959, Norwegian single people were “officially” entitled not just to single-room flats but also to the so-called “amputated” apartments. Such apartments could have a separate sleeping room as long as it could fit “only one bed.” In practice, however, large building cooperatives—for example, OBOS, the most significant building cooperative in Oslo—refused to engage with such housing typology, seeing them as a risky investment without sustained future demand.¹¹ According to OBOS, most cooperative members were happy with the most basic single-room apartments. This was far from the truth—as the Association

¹¹ *Fredrikstad Blad*, 2 December 1964, p.1.

questionnaire showed, an overwhelming majority of single housing seekers—a whopping 90%—wanted a two-room flat.¹²

To get the wanted flats, the Association had to build them. The Association contacted OBOS and the Labour Party's main archenemy, engineer Selvaag, who was in charge of a large construction company, Selvaag Bygg A/S. Together with Selvaag, the Association developed a project for new housing at Kringsjå, a picturesque nature-set northern suburb of Oslo. The project provided 155 flats for single people, distributed across a 10-storey-tall tower with 57 two-room apartments and a low-rise three-storey housing bloc with 98 single-room flats. Each apartment featured an entrance, a room with a sleeping alcove, a bathroom and a kitchen with an electric fridge. Single-room flats on the ground floor of the longer bloc also had private garden access—an innovation at the time.¹³ Completed in 1961, the apartments compared favourably with the general market price, and the Association was pleased with the “practical, spacious and modern” apartments designed by Selvaag. Financed by Husbanken, the project showed that well-designed small apartments were possible even within the market regulations and limited budgets, and the demand was on the rise: so much so that 500 more people were on the Association's waiting list.¹⁴

The positive experience of cooperation with Selvaag— an outspoken critic of the Labour Party and a well-known conservative actor disliked by the social-democratic establishment—led to more joint construction ventures. The ten-storey housing development at Dynekilgata in central Oslo was also built by Selvaag Bygg, and it was the third project by the Association. Completed in 1967, the building featured 160 two-room apartments with a view and large balconies running along the facade. Each apartment was between 43,5 and 45 m², with a large entryway, a bedroom with a window, a kitchen, a bathroom and space for food storage. The bedrooms had enough space to accommodate a child cot, if necessary. There were more storage facilities on the ground floor and an “entirely automatic washing machine.” For the single people who moved in, this was not just the pinnacle of post-war domestic bliss but also the first time they slept on a real bed and not a bedsitter or a couch.

¹² *Totens Blad*, 27 January 1966, p. 3, but also Greve.

¹³ *Norges Kvinner*, 11 November 1960, p. 1, 4.

¹⁴ *Norges Kvinner*, 9 November 1962, p. 2

It is interesting to trace the modernist, progressive language with which the building was described in popular press. With its clean, geometric modernist shapes, new materials, and all-electric new domestic appliances, set within lush greenery, with exposure to sunlight and good views, the housing bloc was the new Eden for single people, the exact opposite of the traditional dark and cramped dwellings in the old housing stock many of new residents had been confined to until now. It was both a fortress and a castle—beyond housing, the building features a new office for single people, providing information on social benefits and even arranging domestic care. Built through own organisation, in cooperation with Selvaag, a vocal advocate of individual will against the homogenising social-democratic politics, the project was a testament to the triumph of new versus old, progress against oppressive tradition, and freedom of an individual over the society.

The Association continued its building efforts, negotiating another development in Østerås in Bærum, a neighbouring municipality, a part of a larger construction project also developed by Selvaag.¹⁵ Other significant projects were completed on the West Coast of Norway in cooperation with Vestplan Architects.¹⁶ Throughout the 1970s, the share of single people in Norway continued to increase, becoming one of the most dominant, but the concerns for single people's housing provision became less relevant as the market gradually liberalised towards the 1980s.

The Loneliness Epidemic

So, what are some lessons that we could take from the experience of the 1960s Norway? Today, 45,8% of all households in Norway are single people, followed by Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Germany. Not least, this is due to the robust welfare support systems, growing individualism and increased life expectancy—as the famous film *The Swedish Theory of Love* would tell us. But what does it mean for the housing market today? Is the housing market prepared for the needs of the single people, and who is advocating on their behalf? As the experience of the Norwegian Single's Association shows, it is essential to be organised to

¹⁵ Jon Skeie, *Bolig for folk Flest: Selvaagbygg, 1920-1998*, 202.

¹⁶ *Sunnmøresposten*, 5 March 1975, p. 10.

make your voices heard, while organised political pressures have a concrete impact on the shape of the built environment. However, who knows what single people today need the most? Ways of living are always in flux, and designers need to account for the changing desires, needs and anxieties of different social groups and alternative living arrangements, which might be overlooked in the contemporary status quo and mainstream political structures but are gradually growing more dominant.