

PLACES

A CITY RETURNS TO ITS FJORD: REFLECTIONS ON OSLO AND THREE DECADES OF WATERFRONT TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract

This paper provides a retrospective reflection on how Fjord City emerged as a central vision for Oslo's urban development. As in many cities during the 1980s and 1990s, concerns grew that Oslo had become disconnected from its waterfront. A lively public debate about the harbour's future role led municipal politicians to commission a study which assessed port activities and the potential benefits of releasing port land for other urban uses. This paper reflects on how Fjord City is understood today, in light of the debates that initiated its transformation. At that time, the Port Authority resisted external involvement in what it regarded as its core professional domain. Today, however, political decisions have contributed to a significant shift in roles: the Port Authority and its subsidiary, Hav Eiendom, have become commercially oriented and active urban developers who are shaping key conditions for the realisation of the Fjord City vision.

Keywords:

Waterfront, Urban Planning, Urban Transformation.

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1. What if the Port moves out?

Like many other settlements, Oslo emerged where sea routes met land routes. For centuries, the city developed in a way that created an ever-greater distance between the city and the fjord. In the mid-1980s, people began to demand that major road schemes, industry, and the port should free up space for housing, waterfront recreation, and improved water quality. This trend occurred in many places. What was about the fact that modern port operations no longer required quay length for loading and unloading, but areas for stacking containers. While other cities had areas suitable for the same within their municipal boundaries, Oslo had neither the geography nor the topography that naturally facilitated such a port. A new modern port within the Oslo municipality would have, regardless of its location, entailed traffic to and from the port through the city centre, as well as extensive land reclamation in the harbour basin. This text is a personal account from within the establishment of what we now refer to as 'Fjordbyen Oslo' (the Fjord City), as well as an external reflection on an urban transformation that has been ongoing for nearly 30 years. The history of the Fjord City is about when we posed the big 'what if?': What if the port moves out of Oslo, and the city returns to its fjord?

My basis for reconstructing this history is my experience as a public-sector planner and project manager for the analytical work that led to the Fjord City decision. From the perspective of planning theory, we are talking here about strategic planning that was conducted before formal land-use decisions. What does a planner do when an open-ended commission arrives from City Hall? The case is also a story about how a municipality adapted to the transition from governmental steering of urban development to becoming one of many actors jointly responsible for implementing market-oriented plans².

2. Provocations and Forecasts

Provocations can be useful tools for kick-starting urban development. When the question of alternative uses for Oslo's port areas was placed on the agenda in 1996, the then Port Director and his board were mightily provoked. I perceived their scepticism as stemming from a mistrust that city planners regarded the port merely as an unaesthetic and unnecessary obstacle to a new urban lifestyle, whose main ingredients were recreation and café-latte drinking. At the same time, a newspaper debate had for some time been circulating among independent port experts about whether the Oslo Port Authority (PA) was running its affairs efficiently enough. This was not a question of whether Oslo should have a port, but of how much land it required. The question centred upon forecasts for goods volumes, methods for stacking containers, and the reclamation of new land to make room for them. Concurrently, many perceived the port authority as unreceptive to outside advice. It seemed as if they believed that decisions about port operations did not concern anyone but themselves – and thus neither did the areas used for these operations. This irked architects and, in particular, city enthusiasts, who believed that Oslo's location at the head of the Oslo Fjord was being completely spoiled by a single actor's dominance.

Following a request from the City Commissioner for Urban Development, the Planning and Building Agency (PBA) initiated a study of alternative uses of the port's areas. Our primary task was to assess the population's access to the water. We defined this as a question of the value of the port sections in a broad sense.

In parallel with PBA's study, the PA was to revise its strategic plan to demonstrate how it would handle the forecast enormous growth in container cargo. While the PA merely used 'small change' of its solid port cashier, we had a budget that was a small fraction of the PA's. However, the PBA could assign a larger internal team to the work than the PA could. The ensuing race towards 'the truth' culminated in an exhibition in central Oslo in January 1998. Here, the results of both planning efforts were presented to the public before the City Council addressed whether port's areas could be used for other purposes. The fact that PBA's arguments for the 'Fjord City' gained support meant that the Port Authority's strategic plan was sent back with a message to adjust it to realise the Fjord City vision. It was 'salt in the wound' for the PA. Almost 30 years later, we now know that the port authority got roughly what it wanted: a modern container port central to Oslo that was financed with income through the heavyweight commercial property development of those areas that were released for other uses.

2 A part of this article constitutes a reworking of a text originally published in a discussion volume about the future Fjord city (Kjellsen et al., 2007).

Today, the term Fjord City is actively used in both urban development and promoting the city as a tourist destination. The term can be perceived primarily as a vision of better contact between the city and the water, but the Fjord City concept was also a strategy that addressed many more and much more important questions tied to Oslo's long-term development.

3. Scenarios for future retrospection

As the project manager for this work, I wrote a scenario description for the year 2015, with a look back at what had happened in 1998, when Oslo City Council decided the port's fate. (The decision was taken two years later.) The task was to foresee how the political argumentation for the decision to be taken might unfold. The alternatives imagined were: "Fjord City", what if port operations were discontinued within Oslo's boundaries? And "Harbour City", what if the port authority's forecasts for future expansion needs were taken seriously and turned into an urban development project? Now in 2026, we know the outcome. Most of the area has been transformed. We can therefore reflect both on what we imagined might have happened by 2015 and on how the vision has been realised.

The term "Fjord City" and its alternative, "Harbour City", were used strategically. They represented the extreme options and were clearly different political choices. For the analytical work to be reliable and not merely received as a provocation, it was important for those of us in PBA not to be perceived as biased. This applied to both the port's advocates and the organised "Fjord City friends". We had not taken a stance in advance. For my part, I remained uncertain until a likely implementation of the two strategies was described; only then did I decide what to advise. I mention this to underscore that such analyses do not reveal the truth but rather only assemble the arguments which we find convincing. An overarching goal was for the City Council to make a clear decision about the port's future in Oslo. Otherwise, port operations would stagnate due to resistance and filibustering of all matters concerning port development within Oslo's boundaries.

Today, we might think that this big 'what if?' had always been associated with political consensus both inside and outside the council chamber. But at that time, it was highly uncertain which side would be in the majority. The planning work was initiated by the Labour Party but thereafter taken over and later steered through to a decision by the Conservatives. Yet many would probably claim that it was originally a Liberal Party politician who posed the question (Kjellsen et al., 2007). Views on the port's significance in Oslo did not divide along party lines but across them.

4. The Gordian knot

Although we worked with spatial visions of the future city, it was my clear opinion then that the opportunity to achieve alternative uses of the harbour areas lay not in architecture but in law. We needed a competition in jurisprudence, not an architectural competition, as many asked for. Some would likely still argue today that the Fjord City vision suffers architecturally, but back then, even a host of fine proposals would not have led to a decision. The main question was to determine what Oslo would gain or lose from an alternative use of its harbour areas. A Gordian knot lay in the relationship between the Harbour Act, the Local Government Act, and the Planning and Building Act. As we saw it, this represented a problem with respect to the values embedded in the areas as well as with regard to who could manage them when they were no longer used as a port. Who owned the port areas? Why should the Ministry of Fisheries, as the superior authority for areas under the Harbour Act, determine urban development in Oslo? Why could the well-filled port fund not be transferred to the municipal fund when both belonged to the municipality of Oslo?

As city planners, we were not allowed to investigate such questions, even though we needed knowledge-based arguments to loosen the Gordian knot. The Harbour Act's provision stated that money earned on port operations could only be used for measures which benefitted port operations. The Port Director's choices were therefore to let money that could not be used accumulate in the bank, build a larger port, or subsidise the port's users. The latter would make Oslo even more attractive and the need for additional space even greater. It was entirely understandable that the port authority wanted to use its many millions to build a grand new container port, preferably along Oslo's entire shoreline. For Oslo, this would have been physically possible only by filling large quantities of rock and soil into the harbour basin to create new land; a solution that the

inhabitants began to resist in the late 1980s. In particular, the question of infilling along the quay edge at the western part of the harbour triggered protests about the port's land use in Oslo.

5. The strategic questions

Alternative uses of port areas concern urban development. Could Oslo as a city gain or lose if the port moved out? This problem implicated many different questions that had to be answered before the City Council could make its decision. Most important to our work was highlighting the extent of the advantages that might arise for the municipality and its inhabitants if the container port either moved out of the municipality or was developed into a large, efficient facility, as envisaged by PA. To achieve this, we developed key strategic questions across a range of themes that would be affected by the decision. These strategic questions were derived from assertions made in the public debate about the port's development opportunities. Through so doing, we were confident that the questions we sought to answer had public interest and political anchoring. My view was also that many of the claims made in the public debate were not knowledge-based. Our task became one of providing the cross-disciplinary knowledge for the politicians to then reach a unanimous decision.

Strategic questions or hypotheses were posed concerning (1) the recreational needs of post-modern urban life and whether port operations truly limited Oslo residents' recreational opportunities; (2) the relationship between the strategic location of port sections and the socio-spatial structures across them; (3) the value potential of the different port sections –what the areas would be worth if used for other (non-port) activities; (4) the port's importance for business activities in Oslo; (5) the various environmental burdens of goods transported; and finally (6) the port's significance for Oslo across a range of regional contexts.

These six themes were treated separately and presented in individual sub-reports; a summary of the thematic studies served as the scenario description for 2015. This was built as a continuous chain of argument for a decision in favour of either The Fjord City or The Harbour City (PBA, 1998).

6. Arguments for the Fjord City

The decisive arguments for recommending the Fjord City to the City Commissioner were socio-economic. Considering the societal trends that we judged to be strong, we concluded that Oslo and its wider region would benefit from using the port areas for housing, other business activities, and accessible public spaces. This would yield increased tax revenues from housing developments, create opportunities for attractive business locations, and reduce transport demand by better balancing workplaces and housing in and around Oslo. The studies clearly showed that Oslo's business community was not particularly dependent on the port's location within the municipality. It was not the case therefore, as some claimed, that if the port moved, jobs would follow. Modern port operations are not major employers. At that time, far more people worked at Aker Brygge (a former shipyard transformed) than in the entirety of the port itself. In addition, the analysis undertaken, demonstrated the area's value potential for alternative uses and higher density.

The uncertainty about who would benefit from this potential was, as noted, a Gordian knot. The PA's key argument for further developing a large port within Oslo focused on environmental arguments. It argued that moving the port farther from the region's core would entail longer transport times for goods by vehicle, and that it was more environmentally friendly to ship goods as far as possible into the centre; ie. to where they are purchased. Isolated as a transport calculation, this assertion was correct. Longer road distances increase CO₂ emissions but, as we demonstrated, these calculations did not take into account other portant parameters. From a global perspective and in the context of total environmental accounting across the entire value chain of goods production, the increase in CO₂ emissions from a few extra miles of driving was (and is) insignificant. More importantly, existent trends at the time of the analysis had already shown that distribution warehouses receiving goods from the port were already being relocated to cheaper plots in neighbouring municipalities north and south of Oslo. This meant that an increasing number of goods bound for shops in Oslo city centre were, already, first hauled out to the periphery and then back into the centre by lorries. When assessing environmental impacts, the number of people affected must also be considered. A port in the city's most densely populated area means that more people are affected by traffic to and from the port than if the port is in an area with a lower population density.

Perhaps because the PA failed to step out of its sectoral silo, it argued for a strategy based on very optimistic forecasts for cargo handled via Oslo harbour, whilst offering no forecasts for how the rest of society might change. Nor did the PA have a spatial perspective on the port in terms of urban morphology. In my view, the PA bet all on two cards: that arguments from the environmental calculus would be accepted as truths, and that the port authority, as the expert body in port matters, would be regarded as more reliable with regards to the avenues of argumentation deployed than the city planners.

7. Oslo Harbour forever

The decision to adopt the Fjord City proposal compelled efficient operation of the port areas. Previously, there had been little will to do so the Harbour and Fairways Act was adjusted, and, under the port-closure provision, port-generated income would be made available, in future, for other public-benefit purposes. The Ministry of Fisheries also tasked the ports in the inner Oslo Fjord with studying a future regional joint port structure; just as we had forecast (Plan-og bygningsetatenOslo, 1997). An inter-municipal company, Viken Havneselskap AS, was established, but dissolved after the study was submitted to the ministry. The conclusion of that work was that an inter-municipal port company should not be created. Instead, it was decided that the existing ports in the region should just cooperate and exchange information on professional and technical port matters. It is important to note that this conclusion was arrived at by a board chaired by Oslo's Port Director, and its recommendation entailed that Oslo should have a large container port within its own borders. Thereafter, the port authority changed its name to Oslo Havn KF and began developing a so-called temporary container port at Sjursøya (sydhavnen), while also communicating that a regional solution would be established and that Sjursøya would be released for alternative use in 2025. Today we know, as I wrote in 2007 – that this would never happen. What we refer to as the Fjord City was, in the late 1990s, the Harbour City.



Figure 1. How port activities have dominated the area connecting the city to the fjord.

The Fjord City decision clearly led to more efficient port operations. In other words, it was good that the then politicians decided in favour of the Fjord City rather than a compromise between the two extremes. Had this not been the case, we would not now be able to discuss urban development in Oslo as we do today. The Fjord City vision positioned Oslo within a space of expectation, one that the port authority, for better or worse, has come to occupy through its role as a commercial property developer under the name Hav Eiendom AS. It was established in 2003 as a limited liability company. With income obtained from developing the former port areas, which is funding the construction of what no one any longer calls a temporary container port. The Port Authority, which rejected new ways of organizing port operations in the Oslo region, chose to establish a new organization to be able to conduct property development in areas where port operations had been discontinued. Compared with other port cities, this way of organising is rare (Sánchez, 2016).

8. Anno 2026

After the initial work in the late 1990s was completed, I have mostly observed Fjord City from the sidelines and as a normal inhabitant of the city. What worried me when I was involved was that the vision would create exclusive enclaves between the city centre and the fjord, without creating socio-spatial links to the districts behind. This was also a question raised by Briers (2020, 12) who noted that, “urban waterfronts are seldom able to become integral parts of the city centre”. In our case, I believe this is organisational. The problem with dis-integration emerged not only through the creation of HAV Eiendom and its mandate, but also from the Planning and Building Agency’s establishment of a dedicated Fjord City Office solely for planning those areas. There is no reason to believe that those who have and are working in this office have not been concerned with the relations that exists between the port sections’ hinterland, and the new developments. Still the tendency for the Fjord City vision to become ‘A Project lying between the city and the fjord’ is very much present. Nevertheless, while PA became a housing developer, PBA focused on public spaces accessible to all. A public urban space runs along the entire waterfront, named ‘havnepromenaden’, and seven commons named ‘allmenninger’ run across the new developments. Whether the integration has in fact occurred is now a matter of personal experience.



Figure 2: The public playground in one of the Bjørvika commons attracts people from all over. Source; The Author

As of August 2026, Fjord City is approaching completion. Bjørvika, the most central part, is finished, and the Fjord City Office has been terminated. However, the area that started the whole process, Filipstad, has been under continuous planning for 30 years, with no actual construction having taken place. The City Council approved the area zoning plan in 2020, and this opens the door to the development of up to 3,000 homes as well as various business activities. To exercise better control over the process, the Oslo municipality established its own agency, Filipstad Infrastructure. Since autumn 2024, it has been responsible for planning and implementing all public spaces and infrastructure, as well as coordinating the various stakeholders involved in the implementation of the same. For the moment it is impossible to see any correlation between this new organisational set-up and the development process for the other major Fjord City sub-area not yet developed, Grønlikaia. The rationale for the new organization may stem from the need to coordinate state transport agencies (roads and rail). But it may also reflect a desire to reclaim some control from a highly proactive and autonomous actor like Hav Eiendom.

Grønlikaia has been subject to extensive planning work combined with early participation processes and later subject in a broad parallel commission initiated by Hav Eiendom. Five interdisciplinary teams delivered feasibility studies with ambitious environmental goals. Hav Eiendom submitted a planning proposal in September 2024, with ambitions for around 1,500 homes, 3,000 jobs, and approximately one kilometre of extended harbour promenade.

Due to a professional disagreement between Hav Eiendom AS, the landowner, and PBA, the planning authority, the process is paused. PBA decided not to send the proposal for consultation, as the normal procedure, citing significant deviations from overarching plans (the Municipal land use plan, the Fjord City Plan, and the High-rise Strategy). The proposed development would create unacceptable visual consequences caused by too high buildings PBA also pointed out that a warning against excessive building height was already communicated at the start-up meeting in 2021, which indicates that Hav Eiendom did not heed PBA's recommendation. An even more serious issue is that the City Government (the responsible politician) nonetheless chose to send the proposal to public consultation, against the advice of its own planning authority. While PBA considered the buildings as too tall, HAV Eiendom continues to argue that the development volume envisaged by the plan is necessary to finance the area's infrastructure, harbour promenade, and public access to the fjord. As of August 2026, the outcome of this disagreement remains unknown.

9. Is Oslo's Fjord City good for the city's population?

Critical perspectives are needed to understand the political, social, and urban dilemmas that have been, and are embedded in the shaping of Oslo's former port sections. Professional interest in the Fjord City's development has been great, but it has not yet been subject to comprehensive critical evaluation. PBA made a summary in 2017 of what was achieved so far. It confesses the early analysis that placed the Fjord City vision within an international trend of urban economic competition (Kolstø et al., 2017). Critics of such use of aesthetics and prestigious cultural activities as selling points warned against overlooking locally rooted culture in this market race for many years ago (Bergsli, 2005). An anthology of different voices presented a snapshot of thoughts before the transformation process had even begun (Kjellsen et al., 2007). Ten years later, it was documented that urban qualities were ensured through the creation and implementation of an integrated and coordinated development process (Bergsli, 2015). Today, our own observations bring this narrative further up to date and tell us more.

It is not only the roof of the National Opera House and the new public library that have become much-loved destinations for residents and tourists. Crowds of people also promenade along the 'havnepromenaden' at the waterside. Such events were beyond what we could have envisioned in the late 1990s, but this was not the case with regard to Oslo becoming a year-round bathing city with an armada of floating saunas in the inner harbour basin. Better access to the water has clearly created a different urban environment compared with the Oslo that residents experienced 20–30 years ago. Special credit should be given to the Port Authority for its efforts to address past environmental impacts and improve water quality

The area's reputation and the influx of tourists have no doubt shifted the city's centre of gravity towards the fjord.



Figure 3. One of the Sauna-villages with the Munch Museum and Barcode buildings in the background. Source: The Author

Despite this, there remains constant commentary in local newspapers and on social media which claims that the buildings are aesthetically unappealing, too colourless, or too tall. Criticism of the Fjord City touches on fundamental questions about architecture, identity, social inclusion, and governance. The debates have centred on the design of the Munch Museum, the height of the Barcode row, the width of Dronning Eufemias street, the lack of social housing, and the privatisation of public space. The latter is especially directed at Aker Brygge and Tjuvholmen, which is two of the earliest developments where private investors took the responsibility for implementing both the buildings and the spaces in between (Hanssen et al., 2021).

The Barcode project, the row of high-rises along the railway tracks, faced strong opposition early on. The criticism concerned building heights and a perceived breach with the idea of creating better contact between the city and the fjord (Andersen and Røe, 2017). It has also been examined more broadly in light of both Fjord City as a vision and aestheticising principles as planning tools (Grønning, 2011). Critics have argued that the development has produced increasingly privatised public spaces, reducing publicness and increasing behavioural regulation. From this perspective, the promise to “give the fjord back to the people” has functioned more as a marketing narrative for waterfront destinations aimed at affluent user groups than as a commitment to ensuring accessible public space for all residents (Bjerkeset and Aspen, 2017).

The case demonstrates the (ongoing) existence of governance challenges and institutional tensions. Both Grønning (2011) and Skrede (2013) pointed to how strong public regulation, combined with neoliberal governance logics and market-driven implementation, affects both objectives and outcomes. Other studies have argued that, despite plans listing social sustainability as a goal, practising architects pay little attention to it, which the authors subsequently claimed has not helped Bjørvika appear to be a just city (Andersen and Røe, 2017).

At the same time, the establishment of the nine-kilometre continuous Harbour Promenade was achieved through collaborative binding, shared principles, strategic governance, and ongoing negotiations between the Oslo municipality and Oslo Havn KF (Moretti, 2017). As an urban area, it appears, at least to one user, to be an openly accessible space for all.

10. Concluding reflection

The question of whether Oslo should continue its port expansion or return to its fjord was a contentious issue for several years before the City Government commissioned its study in 1996. When the City Council decided in favour of the 'Fjord City' approach in 2000, it was a strategic choice that framed subsequent decisions to reduce motorway barriers; prioritise housing, recreation, and culture; and later move/streamline freight and port traffic to Sjursøya. The subject that caused a major conflict in the 1990s – namely, whether the waterfront should represent an industrial working area or an urban, recreational, and housing-oriented landscape – has been silenced. Today, the Port Authority expects to build as large a port as it wishes; a project that will be primarily financed by developing the 'released areas' at very high densities. The Gordian knot might have been untied but questions regarding the size of the container harbour and the expected increase in value of the freed former harbour section remain unanswered.

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