

The Nordic Historic Wooden City:

Analyzing Local Adoption of Historic Districts and Integrated Conservation



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Introduction:

Significant elements of the history and development of Scandinavia and much of the world are intrinsically linked to urban areas. Throughout the Nordic region, modern cities reveal their origins, which can be as long ago as the Middle Ages, in the form of buildings, public space, and the environment. The cultural heritage evident in cities is a key component to cultural identity and city character for both residents and visitors. However, in a region with over 1,000 years of history, many vernacular and “recent past” buildings remain unprotected.

In 1975, The European Charter of the Architectural Heritage was adopted which made a call for “lesser” artifacts of cultural heritage to be integrated into current conservation efforts¹. Many smaller historic towns in Norway and western Sweden contained intact, functioning examples of 19th century life, but were not recognized as having or contributing value to Nordic heritage. These mid- to small-size towns in many cases presented entire districts of vernacular buildings; merchant and retail buildings, port and industry structures, and housing, all of typical wood construction. Forty years after the charter adoption, many towns representative of *den Nordiska Trästad*² (the Nordic historic wooden town) still have a cultural building repository but with varying levels of implementation of preservation laws and protection.³

At present day, a cooperative of Nordic countries have recently created a network of municipalities to celebrate their historic city centers built from wood, revitalizing the 1975 charter’s original goals. The *Nätverket den Nordiska Trästad* (Nordic Wooden Town Network)⁴ educates both administrators and residents about local cultural heritage through conferences and outreach. The *Nätverket* also promotes their member towns as sought-after real estate and tourism destinations, but as towns become more popular development will surely increase. Questions remain as to how many of these towns will plan for urban growth and a denser future, while maintaining their historic urban fabric.

With a direct relation to several of Seattle’s most pressing issues of growth, densification, and the growing debate on the justification of heritage building preservation, Sweden and Norway’s historic wooden cities provide a window into preservation tactics in cities of all sizes and at varying stages of historic status.

Research Objective:

A survey of the current status and future trajectory of preservation in selected historic wooden towns will inform research on historic district development and heritage building preservation in a denser urban context, while providing insight into public perception of cultural heritage significance.

Project Significance to Myself and to Seattle:

Preservation in Seattle

Having been a member of the Seattle Landmarks Board for the past year, I have come to understand the complexity of creating a landmark, let alone a historic district. Beyond heritage qualifications alone, social, political, and economic factors all weigh on the preservation of buildings and at times it can be an uphill battle to both personally and professionally justify a building’s worth. Immediate pressure from governments and project stakeholders often conflict with long-term goals for heritage protection, especially when housing and densification are concerned. Considering the current political climate and soaring property market, it has become more important than ever to determine what is of historical value in our city and what we want to carry into the next generation.

Seattle Historic Districts

Seattle currently has eight historic districts which were all established between 1970 and 1980 during a wave of preservation enthusiasm, with the exception of two more recent former military property districts⁵. Eight is a relatively low number for a city of our size, even on the west coast. Comparatively, Portland has 24 districts and Los Angeles contains over 35 conservation and historic districts. There are at least six additional neighborhoods in Seattle that have the potential for district status, if not more. The creation of a new historic district though, especially in a residential area, is assumed to be 1) incongruous with a densifying city, 2) a control over a property rights and a detriment to property value, and 3) an overwhelming financial burden to the city. Together, these reasons would seemingly bar any additional historic districts from being implemented in Seattle’s future.

Wallingford & Ravenna-Cowen

Recently, however, the Wallingford neighborhood of 1910-1930s craftsman bungalow houses has begun to draw traction for a new district. I have followed the progress of their new organization, Historic Wallingford, for a year and have been helping facilitate fundraising and outreach events for the neighborhood as they begin the conversation with their residents. Elsewhere in the city, the Ravenna-Cowen neighborhood just received a National Historic District designation⁶, emphasizing its significance and potential for the rest of Seattle, yet without a *local* district designation it still remains unprotected. As a relatively young city, and especially considering the cultural heritage other countries have gleaned from centuries of preservation and reuse, I would be hard pressed to believe Seattle would not benefit from developing their historic district program. For these reasons, I am interested in studying the existing historic districts of Sweden and Norway and their formation, so I might learn and be able to educate others on how to better promote preservation.

Project Relevance in Sweden and Norway:

Both Sweden and Norway are experiencing unprecedented growth, with densification increases of 30% expected in several cities by 2030⁷. They, too, are experiencing a housing shortage which when competing with heritage buildings for property, can create an emotional dialogue about justification. The anticipation of increased populations has led Seattle to upzoning and densifying many core neighborhoods that contain vernacular, historical buildings. I am very interested in learning if Norway and Sweden are planning to modify their urban fabric in a similar fashion or in such a way that preserves heritage buildings while being sympathetic to the needs of a growing city.

Counties or *fylkes* in Norway each have a department for cultural heritage or *kulturminner*, so preservation in many towns comes as a trickle-down effect of national politics to locate and designate cultural properties. Few towns have experienced grassroots efforts to preserve and maintain their heritage buildings, but of the towns that have, like Mosjøen, it will be insightful to understand the different processes behind community-led versus municipal efforts. I have reached out to many of the counties that I would be visiting and the three that have responded so far are excited to meet and discuss the subject of districts and density.

Research Methods:

The selection of towns was compiled from the *Nätverket* member cities and from Nyseth's "old towns". The selection was narrowed from 35 towns across all Nordic countries to 16 in Norway and Sweden for both logistical reasons and to cultivate a group of cities with different characteristics, such as population size, size of historic area, and degree of preservation (UNESCO, historic district, none, etc.).

I plan to evaluate at least 9 locations and will be visiting an additional 7. Comparison cities will include four large cities, Kristiansand, Stavanger, Trondheim, and Fredrikstad, and five smaller towns, Mosjøen, Sigtuna, Eksjö, Kragerø, and Risør. If an opportunity arises to meet with a professional or if other resources become available, more towns may be added or swapped from this list if it fits into the time frame. The data from these evaluations would be organized throughout the trip to analyze and better understand how the cities compare to one another as I move forward.

Evaluations of towns will be based on several criteria:

1. Interview with a professional or city representative. What is the conservation status? Is the area successful economically? Are private properties cared for similarly to public properties? What is the plan for new development, if any, in the area?
2. Public opinion surveys (if possible). Is there an appreciation for the area? Is the area considered significant to residents, tourists, or business owners? Should it remain as is or be "modernized"?
3. Figure-ground study of the district. What is the district's relationship to the rest of the city and to itself? What comparisons can be made?
4. Building condition assessment. Are certain areas in any better or worse condition, and why? What is the age (or ages) of buildings in the district?

5. Circulation. Is it well used and functioning? What contributes to this? How does the public space interact with the district?
6. Location. What elements of the site contribute to the district? Are there services? What draws people to the area? How has the city grown outside of the district? What size is the area?
7. Development. What new development has occurred and what standards does it follow? What development occurred in order to restore the district? Who led the effort?

Schedule Overview: Spring 2019

The research study will begin in Oslo, Norway in mid-April and end in Alingsås, Sweden in mid-June. The timing of travel revolves around the dates of the *Nordiska Trästad* conference in Risør, where the *Nätverket* will be gathering along with preservation industry leaders and professionals for a 2-day conference. The majority of travel will be by train and a 15-day non-consecutive EuRail pass will be sufficient for nearly all routes. One flight between Mosjøen to Stockholm will allow me to quickly move from Norway to Sweden without retracing my steps to Trondheim. Most of the accommodations will be via Airbnb or through hostels as available. The schedule takes into account several flex days in case a city might need more or less time.

Map view with approximate dates:



Detailed Schedule:

Locations followed by an asterisk (*) represent evaluated cities.

The project will start in Oslo, NO where I plan to meet Annika Haugen, Director of Buildings at NIKU, a conservation consulting organization in Norway. Annika has provided numerous references to me for studying *den Nordiska Trästad* and I hope to learn more about how her organization performs their work.

April 20th – Arrival



Oslo, NO

April 21st



Fredrikstad, NO*

April 23rd



Kragerø, NO*
Meeting with Telemark
Fylke Conservationist

April 25th



Risør, NO*
Nordiska Trästad Conference
April 25th-26th

April 28th



Lillesand, NO

April 29th



Kristiansand, NO*

May 3rd



Stavanger, NO*
Meeting architect Alex Algard

May 7th



Skudeneshavn, NO

May 8th



Røros, NO

May 10th



Trondheim, NO*
Meeting with Prof. Eir Grytli, NTNU

May 15th



Levanger, NO

May 18th



Mosjøen, NO*
Meeting with Trondelag Fylke

May 23rd



Stockholm/Sigtuna, SE*

June 1st



Visby, SE

June 6th



Eksjö, SE*

June 9th



Alingsås, SE

June 12th Departure

Benefits and Outcomes:

The research and work that will be produced from this exploration has a direct correlation to the independent thesis topic I am interested in pursuing. My mentor and I are discussing using Historic Wallingford's early successes as a basis for producing a historic district nomination as a thesis project and capstone for the historic preservation certificate, as well as a study on the Seattle area identifying potential future districts. The evaluation of successful historic districts in Sweden and Norway and my experience in reviewing individual building nominations will aid the development of my thesis project throughout the second year of my M.Arch program.

Beyond my graduate degree, I will bring this research into my career to inspire neighborhoods like Wallingford and Ravenna-Cowen to pursue district status. Preservation is not only about keeping a building standing, but also shifting the discourse to value cultural heritage. I would like to see a future in which buildings, public spaces, and environments can be preserved and contribute to a dense city with accessible living and working opportunities.

Mentors:

There are quite a few people I plan to meet over the course of this project, but the primary mentors that I will be working with are Manish Chalana, UW, and Torill Nyseth, University of the Arctic, Tromsø, NE.

- Professor Chalana and I first met as fellow board members on the Landmarks Board. Our tenure only overlapped by a few months, but I was pleased to find that he taught in the Urban Planning department here at UW and is a part of the new UW Center for Preservation and Adaptive Reuse. He has helped guide my research proposal from an analytical perspective, and we will continue to work on the evaluation criteria prior to departing.
- Torill Nyseth is a professor in Tromsø and is the author of a brilliant paper on preservation which served as one of my inspirations for this proposal. Professor Nyseth will be providing guidance for my research while I am abroad. I can travel to Tromsø from Mosjøen at the

midpoint of the trip to visit if her schedule allows, otherwise our communication will be primarily over email.

- Unofficial mentors include Hans Sandstrom of the *Nätverket* who I will be meeting at the conference in Risør and who has introduced me to the *Nätverket* member cities and publications. Eir Grytli is another; she is a professor at NTNU who has written numerous books and papers on the subject that have been an enormous help for reference material, and she has suggested we meet with another colleague of hers in Trondheim as they are currently starting a book on historic wooden towns of Norway.

Notes and Resources:

List of Wooden Towns in the *Nätverket den Nordiska Trästaden*:

Aeroskoebing, DK; Skudeneshavn, NO; Stavanger, NO; Turku, FI; Køge, DK, Fredrikstad, NO; Kragerø, NO; Kungälv, SE; Östhammar, SE; Skellefteå, SE; Helsingør, DK, Trondheim, NO; Eksjö, SE; Rauma, FI (UNESCO); Sigtuna, SE; Alingsås, SE; Flipstad, SE; Risør, NO; Karlshamn, SE.

List of Norwegian “old towns” per Nyseth: Alta, Mosjøen, Læderal, Gran, Kongsvinger, Drøbak, Avaldsnes, Stavanger, Sandnes, Risør, Lillesand, Kristiansand, Røros, Bryggen Bergen, NO.

List of wooden towns and Baltic states with historic sites from personal research: Tórshavn, FI-DK; Tvøroyri, FI-DK; Kuldiga, LA; Wooden Käpylä, Nora, Eksjö, and Hjo (“Three Wooden Towns”), SE. Neighborhoods: Vallila and Kumpula, Helsinki, FI; Old Porvoo, FI; Neristan, Kokkola, FI; Pikisaari, Oulu, Loviisa, FI;

Footnotes:

¹ European Charter of the Architectural Heritage passed by the Council of Europe in 1975. <https://www.icomos.org/en/resources/charters-and-texts/179-articles-en-francais/ressources/charters-and-standards/170-european-charter-of-the-architectural-heritage>.

²Also: *Nordisk treby* (N), *bindingsværksbyen* (D), or *Pohjoismainen puukaupunki verkosto* (FIN).

³Torill Nyseth, Johanne Sognnæs. *Preservation of old towns in Norway: Heritage discourses, community processes and the new cultural economy*. *Cities*, Volume 31, 2013, Pages 69-75.

⁴Nätverket den Nordiska Trästaden. www.Nordisktreby.org.

⁵Seattle Department of Neighborhoods. <http://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/programs-and-services/historic-preservation/historic-districts>.

⁶Friends of Ravenna-Cowen. <http://www.friendsofravennacowen.org/>.

⁷Riksantikvaren - Directorate for Cultural Heritage. <https://www.riksantikvaren.no/en/Topics/Urban-Development>.