

English summary

We visited 27 new housing projects in four cities – Trondheim, Bergen, Stavanger and Kristiansand – hunting for good quality outside spaces in heavily built up areas. The results of the study are depressing. We found just three places we would call exemplary. In this portfolio we present these three projects along with successful and less successful solutions from the projects with a view to learning from practice.

An unusually large number of homes have been built in dense, urban environments in recent years. This can be explained by a confluence of several tendencies. To home buyers, a centrally located home is particularly appealing. To the developers, high density projects represent an opportunity to raise the land utility factor and increase the profit margins. The political authorities are looking to densification as a way round the land shortfall and transport needs. These trends, together with the economic climate, have resulted in unprecedented levels of home building in central urban areas.

Purpose and background

Development pressures and increasing density in new projects result in lower standards of the outside area (Guttu and Martens 1998, Isdahl 2007, Schmidt 2007), and explains why we are reviewing outside areas incorporated into recent housing projects in heavily built up areas. The portfolio is intended as a guide for planners, construction firms, experts and local and county council members.

The portfolio contains the results of our study. We want here to highlight good examples and discuss the challenges facing the sector. The case cities were chosen by the research clients, the Norwegian State Housing Bank and Ministry of the Environment.

The four cities have all participated in “Network for Urban Transformation” (“Nettverk for byomforming”) with officials from the Ministry of the Environment, Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, the Housing Bank etc. A network working group has studied outside spaces in the new urban housing projects. As the pressures on outside areas are causing widespread concern, and the Ministry of the Environment and Housing Bank Region West as research clients were interested in commissioning a critical/analytical review of the case studies with examples of successful and unsuccessful solutions.

Norwegian housing policy generally seeks to promote decent housing for all in decent environments and neighbourhoods. The government usually formulates housing and outside space standards and requirements that are included in the Planning and Building Act, in

rules and regulations and criteria and standards recommended by, among others, the Housing Bank. These are based on available research and relevant expertise. Standards and criteria have been relaxed in recent years, and reformulated as general functional requirements. The object here was to generate a more efficient housing market, where standards would be seen to by processes of demand and supply.

Methodology

As an aid in evaluating high and low quality outside spaces, we compiled a check list based on available information on the use of outside spaces and general standards for good quality housing and residential environments. We also assume that the new urban dwellings are suitable for young families.

We obtained suggestions on likely projects from the city councils and Housing Bank. We visited all of the suggested projects and obtained documents and records used in the administrative procedures. Following an assessment based on our check list, we selected the best projects and proceeded to conduct a detailed analysis. We interviewed officials in the city councils on the use of legal provisions. We did not, however, interview residents or building firms or others involved in the planning and construction stages.

The portfolio has two parts. The first presents the three successful projects, the second reviews various issues which are illustrated with examples from the successful and unsuccessful designs.

Three quality projects

We present the three quality examples in their entirety.

Bassengtomba, Trondheim (fig. 1.1) – located in the development area at Nedre Elvehavn, a former ship building and dockyard site on the River Nidelva estuary. Bassengtomba was considered exemplary mainly because the project is in such harmony with the rest of the city. It is thanks not least to the Bassengtomba development that Nedre Elvehavn is now a fully rehabilitated and vibrant city district. Ground and first floors facing the surrounding streets house shops and service facilities. The generous parking space within the inner complex has brought traffic intensity down in the entire district. The project is extremely well designed, both in general terms and with respect to details. Despite a high land utility factor, the outside spaces, raised to a third-floor level, are bright and pleasant. But here lies the weakness of the concept. Because of its setting, and character as a private area, the public in general are unable to use and enjoy it. We would therefore advise against this conception becoming a standard formula.

Georgernes Verft, Bergen (fig. 1.2) is at Nordnes, also this a former dockyard area, located between

Fredriksberg Fort and Puddefjord. The project's high standards are partly to do with its seaboard prospects and good connections with the surrounding areas, and partly the quality of the outside spaces. The project made good use of the opportunities presented by the location, and created a promenade and urban bathing facility that are open to the public. Footpaths to local schools were laid out, along with green areas. Georgernes Verft is a masterly demonstration of how to cater to diverse age groups and users when almost all of the land is in public hands. The project's architecture is pleasant, and a lot of attention has gone into the details. It is known for its high environmental standards. One feature that mars the picture somewhat is lack of residential privacy in homes facing the quayside promenade and bathing facility. And the street through the project could have been broader to allow more sun to reach homes and balconies towards the rear of the project.

Spikerfabrikken (Nymansmarkå), Stavanger (fig. 1.3) was also built on an industrial site in the Storhaug area of the city. This project adopted a lower utilisation measure than most of the others we looked at, and shows how much standards can be improved by doing so. What is so attractive about the *Spikerfabrikken* (lit. Nail Factory) is its precinct within. Most precincts are built on top of a parking area. This one is not. It is moreover open to the public and is more like lovely green park with its numerous play areas, venues and pleasant, variegated flowerbeds and shrubberies. The space is designed to highlight its many uses, and the project shows how outside spaces with varying degrees of public access can be successfully designed for a heavily built up urban setting. One weakness of the project has proved to be the low-lying position of the ground floor, allowing passers-by at pedestrian level a good view of the dwellings and balconies.

The three projects' outside areas are made of high quality materials and standards of architecture, and add to the qualities of the city. They are not without certain problems, however. The other projects were all sub-standard in our view, despite certain good aspects seen in isolation. The standards of some were high, but their outside areas were too cramped. Others had sufficient space, but suffered in matters of architecture and design. We concentrated on centrally located housing projects, and ignored some projects whose outside spaces were acceptable, but lay on the fringes of the city.

Three recurring problems

The problems we noted can be divided into three types.

Connections with the city are poor. Many projects could be described as suburbs within the city. They offer little in terms of shopping, services, cafés, or cultural facilities for the public. They do provide homes of course, which is important, but often little else of value to the city. Enjoying something without giving anything in return is the definition of the freeloader. The projects are isolated zoning plans to start with, and precisely for that reason require careful attention of councils authorities to ensure as "joined-up" a system of neighbourhoods and districts as possible, with access to green areas and technical and social infrastructure. Some councils meet

the needs of the public. Others find that their good intentions got lost during the process.

High density and land shortages combine to create the biggest problem. To offset land shortage, garage space is located below the residential precinct, with deleterious consequences for greenery and vegetation. Outside spaces are cramped; there is not enough room for necessary functions. Cramped outdoor spaces also hinder sunlight from reaching all ground-level areas, people's balconies, terraces and windows. There are problems with lack of privacy. It will be difficult to return to issues arising from high density housing in the future. Residents must therefore expect to live with the disadvantages for the lifetime of the project.

The design or layout of the outside area is testament to the different aims and capacities of construction firms, construction clients and planners. Most common areas sited on top of underground facilities are denuded and barren, with little or no greenery at all. Trees are particularly rare. Aesthetics come before usefulness. Small outside spaces are divided into even smaller bits, reducing the utility function even further. Children's need for space to play in is evidently not a priority. They sometimes have to leave the projects entirely to find spaces conducive to their activities.

Legal instruments

We studied the planning documents and interviewed officials in the council departments in charge of the three quality projects. We wanted to hear what they had learned during the planning process and whether legal tools are useful for raising standards of outside spaces. All of the four councils had adopted playing area standards and requirements under section 69, paragraph 3 of the Planning and Building Act, in non-built up parts of the project. We found such provisions to be important, but no guarantee of a good result. The three examples of excellence are similar insofar as they all were blessed with ambitious builders, proficient architects and landscape architects.

Conclusion

Many housing projects come with cramped, sub-standard outside spaces. While all residents suffer, it affects children and less mobile elderly people. We can trace the poor standards to priorities and choices made throughout the construction process, where all parties have a responsibility. Councils are ultimately responsible for ensuring integrated, joined up urban development and housing. All parties are responsible for providing sufficient space and good quality outside areas. Developers and planners have a particular responsibility to ensure a good standard of design and deployment of the outside spaces.

Although all four councils have statutory provisions on outside spaces, the standards of the projects are below par. This is a conundrum. If there is a desire to reach political targets regarding decent dwellings and decent residential environments, public authorities – central and local – must take steps to ensure the quality of outdoor spaces in high density urban settings.