

## Carl Berners plass; from traffic junction to urban square, a process of 81 years

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### Introduction

The landscape architecture office **Dronninga landskap AS** was founded in Oslo, September 2005. Dronninga landskap considers projects to be "haut paysage": exclusive and with emphasis on art aptness. We want our work to be lush, fertile and tailor made. We are committed to the design of public space, public transport on rails and a green and blue urbanism.

Dronninga landskap is currently completing the Carl Berners plass, presented here.

### Summary

Carl Berners plass is situated in a densely populated area in the eastern part of the inner city of Oslo. The junction serves as an east connection between the avenues from the city center and the middle boulevard; Ring 2. The new design of the avenue system is based upon the Great City Plan of 1929, bringing back the urban and green qualities from when car traffic did not dominate the square.

A process of implementation with different users and departments resulted in a new hierarchy of functions. Planted, generous sidewalks and a new tramway were given priority to the private car. The new plan was controversial when proposing a reduction of car capacity with 40 %. After 5 years of planning and 2 more years of political process, the building site finally started in 2008. When the constructions finish 3 years later, an 81 years old urban plan will be completed.

### Background and process

Oslo is the booming capital of Norway, growing fast from a quiet capital to a bigger city with one million people in the 14 municipalities creating the urbanized area of Oslo. Expected growth in the Oslo area is 20.000 a year due to high fertility, low mortality, immigration and national migration.

The square of Carl Berner is situated in the north-eastern part of the inner city of Oslo. The working-class area is today an object of gentrification. New urbanization, mostly habitation of deserted areas in the surrounding of the square, will strengthen the connection with the inner city. Several new projects are built and planned.

#### 1929

The City Plan from 1929, *Fra Christiania til Stor-Oslo (From Christiania to Greater Oslo Area)*, was the first plan in Norway to define and plan the streets in a city according to functions. The author, Harald Hals, had studied and worked in the United States, and based on his experiences of private car traffic, he planned a set of park streets, a new notion in Norway. First and foremost was the Great Ring Street (Ring 2) between the Tøyen Park in the east and Frogner Park in the west. Hals himself was the architect of the part between Carl Berners plass and Tøyen. The plan also describes the layout of parks and green areas within the city, the important connections to the forest surrounding the city and further development of a system of park streets and playgrounds to ensure these green connections.

#### 1960s

The Second World War put an end to the continuation of the park street and the exploding traffic afterwards turned the former streets, avenues and square into a car based road system, leaving poor areas

for pedestrians and urban life. That the Great Ring Street was now known as the "Church Road Ring" (Kirkeveiringen), accentuates its transformation from urban street to traffic artery. Carl Berners plass has for the last 50 years been a grey junction defined by heavy traffic of cars, busses and a worn-out tramway system.

#### 1980s

The National Road Department (Statens vegvesen) built a third boulevard and a tunnel system, leading the traffic around the city center. The former boulevard Ring 2 has therefore lost its regional importance and can be treated more like a normal avenue. During the 1990's several proposals were launched to put the remaining car traffic in a tunnel under the square. But the projects were calculated too expensive and it would anyway not solve the car problem since it reappears in the neighbor block.

#### 2000

The National Road Department then decided to make an urban street project based upon new principles. The traffic flow was analyzed and arranged according to a formulation of objectives. Priorities are given to people, the tram and the busses, rather than the car traffic. A new set of rules and a hierarchy were launched:

1. Streets, not roads
2. Generous and planted sidewalks
3. Tramway priority
4. New bus lanes
5. New bike lanes
6. Car lanes reduced from 4 to 2

Implementing the plan with the different users, municipal departments and the city council was a long process. Different interest organization as the Bikers organization, the Handicapped organization, the National Trust, the neighborhood etc all played an important part. Because of the complexity in functions and the density of the area, it needed to pass through different public departments with different internal culture and values. The plan was also secured by the different internal departments of the National Road Department itself.

The new plan was controversial when proposing a reduction of car capacity with 40 %. The plan was therefore not approved until after the election and the leader of the city council from the right wing party, normally car friendly and anti tramway, was sure to have been reelected.

### Urban design

The rectangular shape was an immediate response to the surrounding buildings. During the process we also discovered a square in the original plan from 1929 and on photos from the 1930s. A sunken green square in the middle will be planted with pine trees (*Pinus sylvestris*) and Tokyo cherry trees (*Prunus yedonensis*) to give identity and character. The one car lane going around leaves generous sidewalks for vegetable market and outdoor cafés. Groves of Tokyo cherry trees at the outer border of the pavement give a springtime sensation in pale pink in the former grey junction.

The streets consist of the historical avenue of Trondheimsveien crossing the boulevard of Christian Michelsens gate and Grenseveien (Ring 2). Trondheimsveien leads from the inner city and means the road to Trondheim. The tramway is moved from the side of the street to the centre, as it used to be around 1965. It is a symbolic gesture to put the public transport on rails in the middle of the urban space, showing the central role it plays in today's urbanism. Two green lanes of the Oslo tram tree, the cypress oak (*Quercus robur* 'Fastigiata Koster'), creates a strong and green urban structure. The smaller Tromsøgata was closed for 50 years, and is now reopened and integrated in the urban pattern, bringing new energy to the quarter.

Christian Michelsens gate (Ring 2) was planned as a park street. A line of Turkish hazel (*Corylus colurna*) will complete the green city plan from 1929, where the idea of creating a park street between east and west was elementary. The greenery will soften the environment and give the public space lushness and beauty.

"Spaces left over after planning" leaves 4 small triangular spaces. These spaces are needed as small, green intermissions between the buildings, as the density in the area increases. A roof of magnolias in the triangle (*Magnolia kobus*) between Trondheimsveien and Finnmarksgata and an amfi of steps in the square between Finnmarksgata and Frydens gate, are perfect for small rendezvous'. A patch of grass and Elm trees (*Ulmus* 'Rebona s-resista') is located at the side of the tramway, bus and taxi station. A park appears when an unnecessary part of Sinsenveien is closed. This consists of a lawn with a grove of magnolias in the middle and is bordered by Amur trees (*Phellodendron amurense*) and a line of Norwegian maple (*Acer platanoides* 'Vestby') that continues down the east pavement of Trondheimsveien.

The struggle for the pedestrians comfort and security resulted in quite wide pavements, compared to the rest of Oslo. The new sidewalks are designed with strong emphasis on accessibility and universal design. All pedestrian crossings are accessible for wheelchairs and easily readable for the visually handicapped. The gutter that collects rainwater is integrated in the pavement and works as directional guidelines for the visually handicapped, as well as watering the trees. The pavements base course is constructed in a way that improves the trees growing conditions. All details are tailor-made to give the site long endurance. The infrastructure underground is coordinated and detailed to comply what's visible on the ground.

### **The final work**

The traffic system had to be held intact during the construction time, due to its position as a node. The winter of 2010 was the coldest and longest winter in 25 years. The temperature dropped to - 20°C in the early mornings in January and February. This complicated and postponed the building site almost a year, causing many complaints from the public and the press.

In springtime 2010, most of the new street system has opened. The new tramway is placed in the middle. The car traffic is already reduced, without increased car use in neighboring streets. Where has this reduction found place? The tramway and the metro line passing Carl Berners plass have had an important increase in passengers. When the new sidewalks and bike lanes are completed, a further reduction is possible in the same time as the population of Oslo is increasing. The next step is to continue the tramway to Tonsenhagen, a project now being processed in the city council. The bus line 31's capacity is already swamped, meaning a 6 minutes interval nearly 16 hours a day. And as it now runs parallel with the tram from the city center to Sinsen, a prolongation of the tramway will further decrease the traffic passing Carl Berners plass.

More than 200 street trees of 12 different species will be planted this May and June. After 5 years of complex planning and designing, 2 years of hard political negotiation and 3 years of complicated building site, finally, the 81 year old city plan of a park street and a rectangular square, **as found**, will be achieved.