

Park politics in Oslo

1920 – 1940

Implementation and Reception

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Abstract

Park politics is the subject of critique by the landscape architecture profession. This article explores the politics surrounding the parks realised in Oslo in the 1920s and 30s, which was critiqued in a book by some of the most prominent landscape architects in Norway at the time: *Vår tids hage* [The Garden of Our Time] (Aspesæter et al., 1939). The book reads as a commentary on the development in Oslo during that period. This study uses contemporary books by the key policy makers as resources for the ideology of these parks and aims to show how the actual park politics in Oslo were acknowledged and critiqued by contemporary landscape architects working in the first decades of the 20th century. This is then used as a backdrop for the study of today's park politics, which has been strongly influenced by the densification policy that was introduced in the 1990s and that puts additional strain on green spaces inside town and city boundaries. Up until then, urban development had, for the most part, come about as a result of urban expansion, and the urban growth that has taken place since the Second World War has been extensive in terms of land space use. One result of this study is an attempt to establish a periodisation of the park politics in Oslo in order to shed light on the consequences of recent developments in park politics.

Keywords

Marius Røhne, Harald Hals, green structure, reception, critique

The Establishment of Park Politics

Until 1916, public parks in Oslo were developed either by private citizens, associations, or by the Royal Court, e.g. the private garden, The Promenade, developed by the association Oslo Byes Vel, in 1810 - 20, and Bygdøy, developed as a public park by the Royal Court from 1837 onwards (Jørgensen & Thoren, 2012). In 1916, the Parks Department in Oslo was established, and garden architect Marius Røhne (1883 - 1966) was appointed as its head. Marius Røhne had studied garden architecture at the Royal Garden School at Rosenborg Palace in Copenhagen, and had worked in garden architect Edvard Glæsel's office, before he became a graduate of the Norwegian University of Agriculture in 1911. He set up his own private office in Oslo in 1913. A major achievement, made together with garden architect Iosef Oscar Nickelsen, was the design of the exhibition grounds for the 1914 Jubilee Exhibition that marked the centenary anniversary of the 1814 Constitution. The design received very positive feedback from, amongst others, the leading art historian Carl W Schnitler, who wrote that this was the first example of a modern park design in a European style. He characterised the design as the decisive breach with the "landscape imitation" style, for the benefit of a "style with an attitude, formality and coherence" (Bruun, 2007, p. 322) (All quotations of the original Norwegian texts are by the author.)

When the position as head gardener was announced in 1916, Røhne was the obvious candidate. He held the position as Head of the Parks Department until 1948 and published a comprehensive history of the Parks Department in 1967. What had previously been fragmented and arbitrary developments gradually took on a more systematic approach under Røhne's leadership. The development of park areas in the eastern and poorer parts of the city, along the Akerselva River, became part of a new planning focus, where green spaces for the public in and around the residential areas were given priority over prestigious park developments in the city centre.

Røhne found it necessary to develop a 'park culture' in the city by nurturing the feeling of ownership of the park development in the residential areas (Røhne, 1967, p.29). This was achieved by removing all fences around the green areas, keeping a high standard of maintenance and in the first years even guarding the green areas to avoid vandalism. This strategy seems to have worked (Elke, 2006, p.7). Røhne emphasises the 'park culture' strategy for the parks politics of the 1920s and 30s in his book. One such example is Grünerløkka, where green spaces were integrated and developed into proper parks linked by the Akerselva riverside project. The style was predominantly neoclassical.

The idea for Akerselva was to create a contiguous green space through the east side of the city, from the city centre to the periphery along the river. This focus on parks and green spaces, as well as on housing quality, was the joint effort of Marius Røhne and the Chief City Planner of Oslo, Harald Hals (1876 - 1959). As planning director in Oslo from 1926 to 1947, Hals contributed significantly to the modernisation of Oslo, including the addition of green spaces as part of the planning philosophy. Hals studied and worked as an architect in the USA, and was inspired, for example, by Olmsted's work "The Emerald Necklace" in Boston.

He travelled widely and was well aware of contemporary developments in urban planning in Europe. He was especially interested in the Garden City movement and organised the planning competition that led to the first garden city in the vicinity of central Oslo, Ullevål Hageby. In the municipal master plan from 1929, Harald Hals says, "It is our time that has made parks and green spaces to a very important and absolutely indispensable part of the urban organism" (Hals, 1929, p.182). It was less a question of defining standards for green spaces in residential areas, and more an attempt to emphasise the virtues and advantages of having green spaces blended into the urban structure.

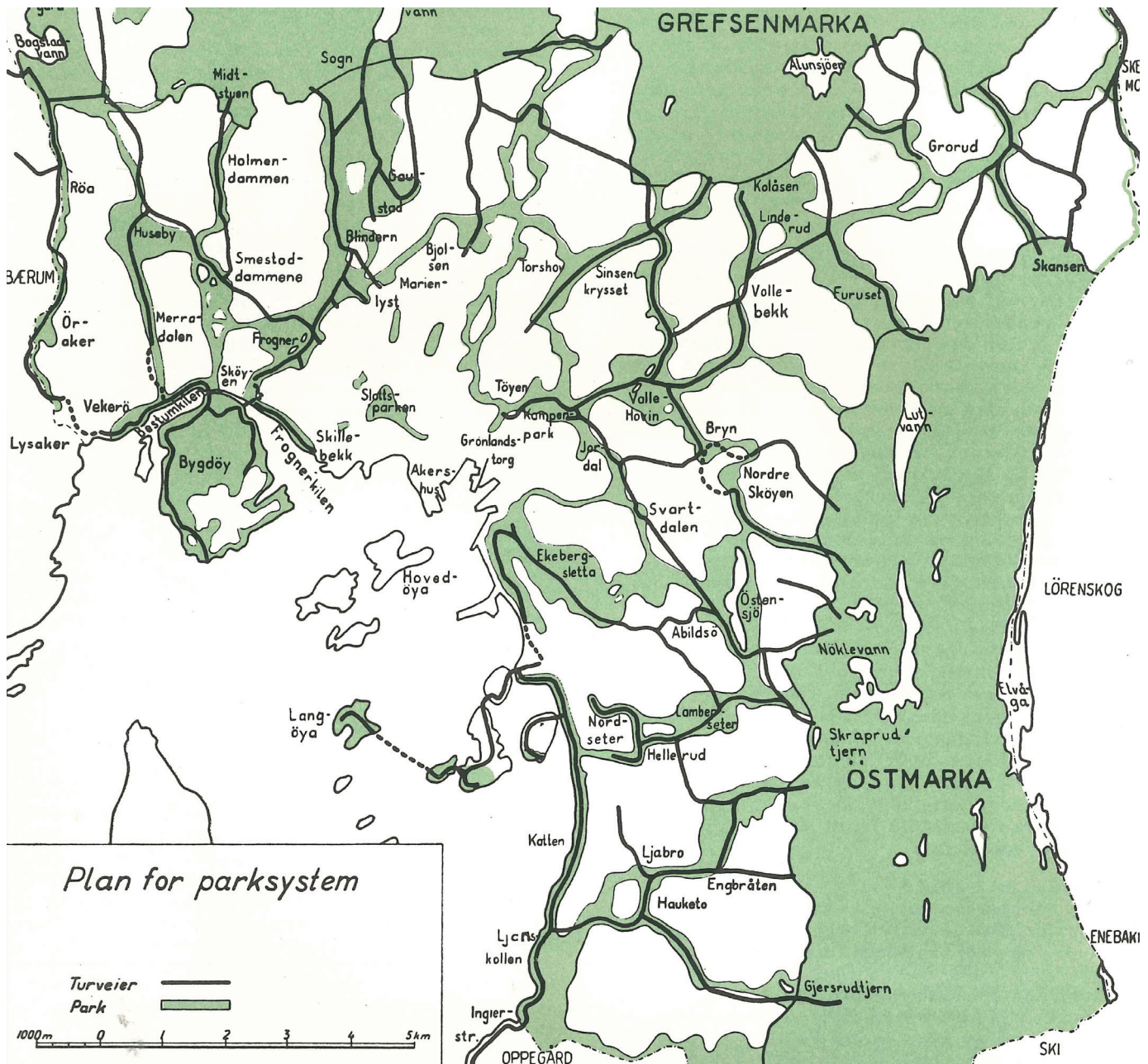


FIGURE 1 Røhne's "green arteries" as adapted by the planning department in 1949.

It is important to note how the forests and parks, and green belts, appear for the first time as main elements in the 1929 municipal master plan, and how Hals used what he called "modern" methods to estimate the required quantity of green. One of these methods was his categorisation of green areas in "district parks, community parks, nature parks, playgrounds, practice places, sports grounds, school gardens, allotment gardens and green belts." These categories relate well to his statement regarding the parks system; the idea was not only to satisfy standard requirements for e.g. playgrounds and sports facilities but also to "force all these isolated areas together in a cohesive parks system" (Hals, 1929). This echoed the mission statement from the Head of the Parks Department. According to Røhne, the parks should be integrated into a system of radial arteries, or "green fingers" (Røhne, 1967, p.70) (Fig. 1). Regarding the green areas as a system was obviously a better and more effective basis for a park policy. Parks were considered as an important part of the air purification system, so improving the air quality was also part of the Hals/Røhne vision for Oslo's parks system. This principle was followed up in later municipal plans (Fig. 2) (Thoren, 2009).

The authors seem to be more indifferent to the social attitude and concern demonstrated by Røhne's efforts, for example, to develop a park culture and residents' ownership of the new parks. *Vår tids hage* is of course not the only publication that provides commentary on park politics. The small pioneering group of garden architects were quite productive in terms of articles and books, but *Vår tids hage* is representative, and the authors are among the most influential garden architects of the time. Eyvind Strøm worked part-time in the planning division of Oslo's parks department from 1926 – 1936, and was a partner in the major garden architecture firm Strøm & Hindhamar from 1927 – 1936, finally heading the planning division of the Oslo parks department from 1936 until the mid-1960s.

Vår tids hage was probably also influenced by foreign titles on park politics such as C.Th.Sørensen's *Parkpolitik i Sogn og Kjøbstad* [Park Politics in the Districts and the Cities] (1931), Hugo Koch: *Gartenkunst im Städtebau* [Garden Art in Urban Planning] (1914) and Harry Maasz: *Das Grün in Stadt und Land* [The Green in Town and Country]. On the final page of *Vår tids hage*, these, as well as other publications are mentioned as relevant further reading. Other contributions exploring the new ideas for parks and gardens, like the significant article by G.N.Brandt: *Der kommende Garten* [The Coming Garden] (1930), were part of the general contemporary discourse, and probably inspired the book (Stephensen, 2007, p.121). These and other sources of the time, emphasise the need to integrate "garden art" into urban planning. The authors state that regarding the new literature in this field, the English and German books are the most important.

The discussions and references to the parks development in Oslo show how the authors of the book 'The Garden of Our Time' were partly aligned with, and partly contradicted the park politics in Oslo, in the 1920s and 30s. The authors hardly comment the social strategy of the politics. They acknowledge the policy makers' efforts to include the urban green as an integral part of the master plan but are critical of the manifestation of neoclassical style that is the outcome of the politics. This can be linked to the "nature wave" that influenced landscape architecture from the 1930s onwards.



FIGURE 3 The trails should accommodate use during both the summer and the winter seasons. "Damefallet" [The Ladies' Fall] (Rolfsen, 1950).

Park Politics in Oslo Since WW2 - the Marka Border Example

The ideologies and discourse from the inter-war period have influenced the park politics in Oslo in the post-war era. This is partly due to long-lasting periods of office for central figures. Hals and Røhne both retired shortly after WW2, Røhne after more than 30 years in office. After his retirement, Røhne devoted himself to writing the history of the parks and recreational areas in Oslo (1967). The book, *Oslo kommunale parker og grønnanlegg 1810-1948* [Oslo Municipal Parks and Green Areas 1810-1948] is a detailed historical account of the parks' development. It was intended as a sort of dictionary for the parks department and had very few critical reflections (Apall-Olsen, 2007, p.44). In 1948, Oslo merged with the surrounding municipality, Aker, a step that had been Røhne's and Hals' intention since long before the war. The new borders corresponded largely to the plans from 1929. Hals' assistant from 1938 onwards, Erik Rolfsen, later became Chief City Planner in the 1950s, and continued the developments initiated by Hals and Røhne until the 1970s. Through specific plan decisions, parts of the politics from the 1920s were retained: the green arteries survived through The Parks System and Trail Plan of 1949, although they came under heavy pressure from developers. The green arteries principle was confirmed in a plan promoted by Rolfsen as late as 1975 (Thoren, 2009).

Not all parts of the park policies have emerged as part of the discourse on green structure per se. An example of this is the peculiar development related to the building zone: the Marka Border. This border was the result of a decision from 1934 to limit the developed areas in Oslo to a certain altitude, due to the constraint on water pressure. Housing development above this altitude was prohibited, because the waterworks could not guarantee a steady water supply. This limit later became one of the most central issues in the park politics. The contour line at a specific altitude became a line that divides the city and the green hills and forests around it: the so-called 'Marka-Border'. Technological developments soon made the water pressure argument irrelevant, but gradually the justification for this border changed; the need for recreational areas for the rapidly growing city increased. This turn of the argument was possible because the discourse regarding the need for recreational areas was already established. The border is still a central subject in park politics in Oslo today, and the phenomenon, and its history, is still the subject of research. In the 1970s, the city planning office in Oslo attempted to have the green belt and the border protected by law. The transition area between the built-up area and the green belt created a certain feeling of ownership and, one could say, a park culture, which may be considered a new version of the park culture of the 1920s. A slogan for Oslo shows to what extent the Marka has become a part of the city's identity: "the blue and the green and the city in between". (Børud, 2015) Elin Børud refers to the European Landscape Convention when analysing the unique qualities and challenges of this transition zone, especially the forces and pressures that transform it (ibid). In the 1980s, neo-liberal politics changed much of the park politics in Oslo. Private developments broke away from the earlier consensus, and the legislative ideas were put aside. The Marka-Border, however, largely withstood the attempted developments outside the building zone. The first decade of the 2000s has brought new attention to green values and new efforts to meet environmental challenges. In 2009, the Marka Act was finally endorsed, and the Oslo green belt is thus now permanently protected, and it seems that Oslo is entering a new era in its park politics. In 2019, Oslo will receive the European Green Capital Award. The park politics and the protected green belt is a central part of the justification for the award:

"Oslo is the capital city of Norway and has a population of 658,390. The city is surrounded by the Marka Forest, a nationally protected area, and the Oslo Fjord, both connected by a number of waterways. Oslo's approach to conserving its natural areas and restoring its waterway network is just one of the many reasons why it won the European Green Capital Award for 2019."

From the European Commission website <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/europeangreencapital/winning-cities/2019-oslo/> (July 2018)

The Long Lines of Park Politics in Oslo

The review of the park politics in Oslo from the 1920s, its critique, and the development up to the present day, reveals a series of rather distinct periods in the city's green urban planning history. In the inter-war period, the parks system ideas are developed, and after the war, the green structure system is implemented. This gradually turned into a period of decline, which characterises the period after 1980. The growth, as well as the decline, is to some extent associated with the municipal financial situation and the decline around 1980 especially is connected to the financial crisis, resulting in poor municipal finances and a population decline, as well as a shift in general policy. Recent decades of densification and population growth have made it more challenging to safeguard green structure today, and this has led to attempts to restore stronger park politics. These attempts have now resulted in the European green capital award 2019.

A periodization of the development of park politics in Oslo may thus be as follows:

- Until 1916: Emergence of public parks in Oslo
- 1916 – 1948: The parks system approach is introduced
- 1948 –1980: The green structure grows and culminates
- 1980– 2009: Discontinuation and decline
- Since 2010: Attempts to restore a park politics.

These examples show how the park politics that were formulated early in the 20th century have influenced the development of the parks and green areas in Oslo for several decades, and still have value, almost a century later. It also illustrates the significance of a planning discourse inherited from the first city planners and their emphasis on the need for green recreational areas in the city. Reading the contemporary critics of the park politics from that time provides depth to the understanding of the significance of the early planning efforts in Oslo.

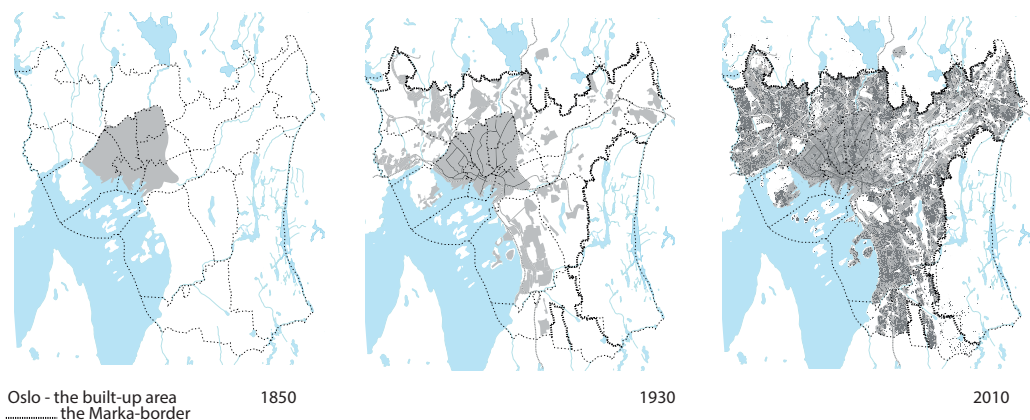


FIGURE 4 The maps of Oslo's built-up area in 1850, 1930, and 2010 show how efficiently the Marka-Border has worked to limit the urban development. (Drawing by Elin Børrud).

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