



Government Quarter, Oslo, Norway. Threatened with demolition, the Y-Block with Picasso's "Fishermen" mural incised into the end façade of the Y-block to the left (1969) and H-block to the right (1958), Architect Erling Viksjø, Artist Pablo Picasso

Photo: Teigens Fotoatelier, Copyright: Dextra Photo.

## **International Heritage Alert Launched by ICOMOS**

**September 28, 2016**

### **PRESS RELEASE**

**The International Scientific Committee on Twentieth Century Heritage (ISC20C) of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) has released an International Heritage Alert regarding the threatened demolition of the Y-block of the Government Quarter in Oslo, Norway. This action supports the conservation initiatives of ICOMOS Norway and confirms international concern about threats to the heritage significance of this important modern heritage complex in the center of Oslo.**

ICOMOS Norway has undertaken extensive research into this case, and confirms that the architectural and artistic merit of the Y-block, as well as its historical significance, is uncontested. Architect Erling Viksjø conceived the high-rise H-block and the lower Y-block as whole, clearly connected to similar contemporary head-quarters for democratic purposes (ex. United Nations, New York and UNESCO,

Paris). The high-rise H-block was erected in 1958 with pioneering treatment of the sandblasted natural concrete and integrated works by merited modernist artists, including contributions by Pablo Picasso. In 1969 the building complex was completed by the addition of the sculptural Y-block. Its three curved wings define three urban spaces of individual character. Picasso's "Fishermen" in one of the facades is an epitome of public art integrated within this extraordinary complex.

ICOMOS understands that the Directorate for Cultural Heritage proposed in June 2011 to list the two Viksjø buildings as protected monuments. That process was brought to a halt by the terrorist attack on July 22, 2011, but the terrorist attack gave the Government quarter an extra dimension as an important national memorial.

In May 2014 The Norwegian Government decided to collocate a major part of the ministries on the site of the Government Quarter, a decision based on concerns for security and efficiency. Implicit in the planning process was preservation of the damaged H-block and demolition of the Y-block. Demolition is therefore a premise for the new governmental zoning plan under public hearing.

Monday 15th February 2016 ICOMOS had a meeting with the Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Administration. Present at the meeting were State Secretary Paul Chaffey. ICOMOS was represented by Marianne Knutsen, President of ICOMOS Norway, Olaf Steen, ICOMOS ISC20C, and Gunny Harboe, ICOMOS ISC20C vice president (on telephone line from Chicago). Gunny Harboe had prepared a video which was uploaded to Youtube and clearly states the views of the ICOMOS ISC20C.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgZwbuDwa\\_4&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgZwbuDwa_4&feature=youtu.be)

The State Secretary was very clear on the point, that the decision to demolish the Y-block was already made on a governmental level, and was hardly approachable. The main argument is security, since a thoroughfare runs in a tunnel beneath the short, northern wing of the building. The security claim is seen by the ICOMOS as questionable, as the government has up to today not shown any documentation as to the necessity of demolishing the Y-block. Besides, parts of the building, amongst which the northern wing, are actually today in full use by government employees, who are very happy to work in the building.

The government wishes to place a park above the thoroughfare, but still they have to secure the tunnel better by lowering it. The zoning plan presently on public hearing presupposes a new, high building in place of most of the Y-block, excepting the area of the northern wing which will be substituted by a green belt over the thoroughfare tunnel.

National experts in the fields of culture, arts and architecture state that by this decision, essential cultural values of the Government Quarter are disregarded, ostensibly for reasons of security and optimal

exploitation of the site. ICOMOS Norway do not believe that convincing arguments have yet been made that confirm that demolition of Y-block is the only means to attain a secure and functional workplace. Preliminary reports from consultants assert that both structures may be usefully integrated in the envisaged new layouts – if the Norwegian government is willing.

The National Committee of ICOMOS Norway has drawn international attention to the current studies and zoning plans being prepared by the Norwegian Government which may threaten the integrity and heritage value of this important building complex. An international sub-committee of the International Council of Monuments and Sites, Twentieth Century Heritage Committee (ISC20C) including representatives from Australia, Sweden, Mexico, South Africa and USA has examined the documentation provided about the proposed demolition of the Y-block and the heritage values of the Government Quarter as a whole. The ICOMOS ISC20C has written to the Norwegian Prime Minister and Government seeking its urgent re-consideration.

The ISC20C believes that a strong case can be made for the architectural, artistic and historical values of the H-block and Y-block of the Government Quarter as a whole, equally meeting the criteria for heritage listing, within a Special Protected Zone. ICOMOS Norway considers that the political decision for demolition is contrary to acknowledged national heritage values, and that alternatives for preservation have not been duly considered. The preparation of a Conservation Management Plan, including a thorough examination of re-use options for the entire complex, is needed to inform any decision maker on the future development of the site. The Prime Minister's attention has been drawn to the applicability of the recently published *Approaches for the Conservation of the Twentieth Century Architectural Heritage* (the Madrid Document) which represents international best practice in the management of modern heritage places such as the Government Quarter.

The ICOMOS ISC20C has recently been involved in a similar case in Hong Kong, where the demolition of the West Wing of the Central Government Office complex was threatened with demolition. After the issue of an international heritage alert by the ISC20C and considerable media attention and public pressure, the SAR government of Hong Kong reconsidered its position, and heritage listed the whole complex, and the building is now being refurbished for ongoing government use.

The International Heritage Alert process uses the ICOMOS ISC20C's international professional and public networks to investigate requests for international action where potentially significant heritage places are threatened, by using international experts to assess research and comparative values, in order to achieve a rigorous, independent assessment of the situation.

In cases such as the Y-block (and the H-block), where the heritage values are well-proven, a Heritage Alert can be used to draw international attention to the threat and to promote good conservation solutions. The Heritage Alert will be uploaded to the ISC20C website and broadly distributed through the

networks of ICOMOS, DOCOMOMO International, and the International Union of Architects. It will be updated as further information comes to hand. The Heritage Alert review was undertaken by ISC20C members from Sweden, the USA, Mexico, South Africa and Australia, who reviewed the documentary evidence.

Beside the architectural and heritage loss, the demolition of the Y-block would be seen as a sign of departure from the widely acknowledged commitment of Norway to the protection and long-term conservation of its cultural heritage and historic sites of all periods, not least the 20<sup>th</sup> Century heritage.

We therefore urge the Prime Minister and the Norwegian Government to suspend the current proposal and to engage in a process to ensure that the heritage significance of the Government Quarter as a whole, including the Y-block, is retained as one of Oslo`s and Norway`s landmarks of 20<sup>th</sup> Century architecture. For more information, please visit:

[www.icomos.no](http://www.icomos.no)

[www.icomos.isc20c.org](http://www.icomos.isc20c.org)

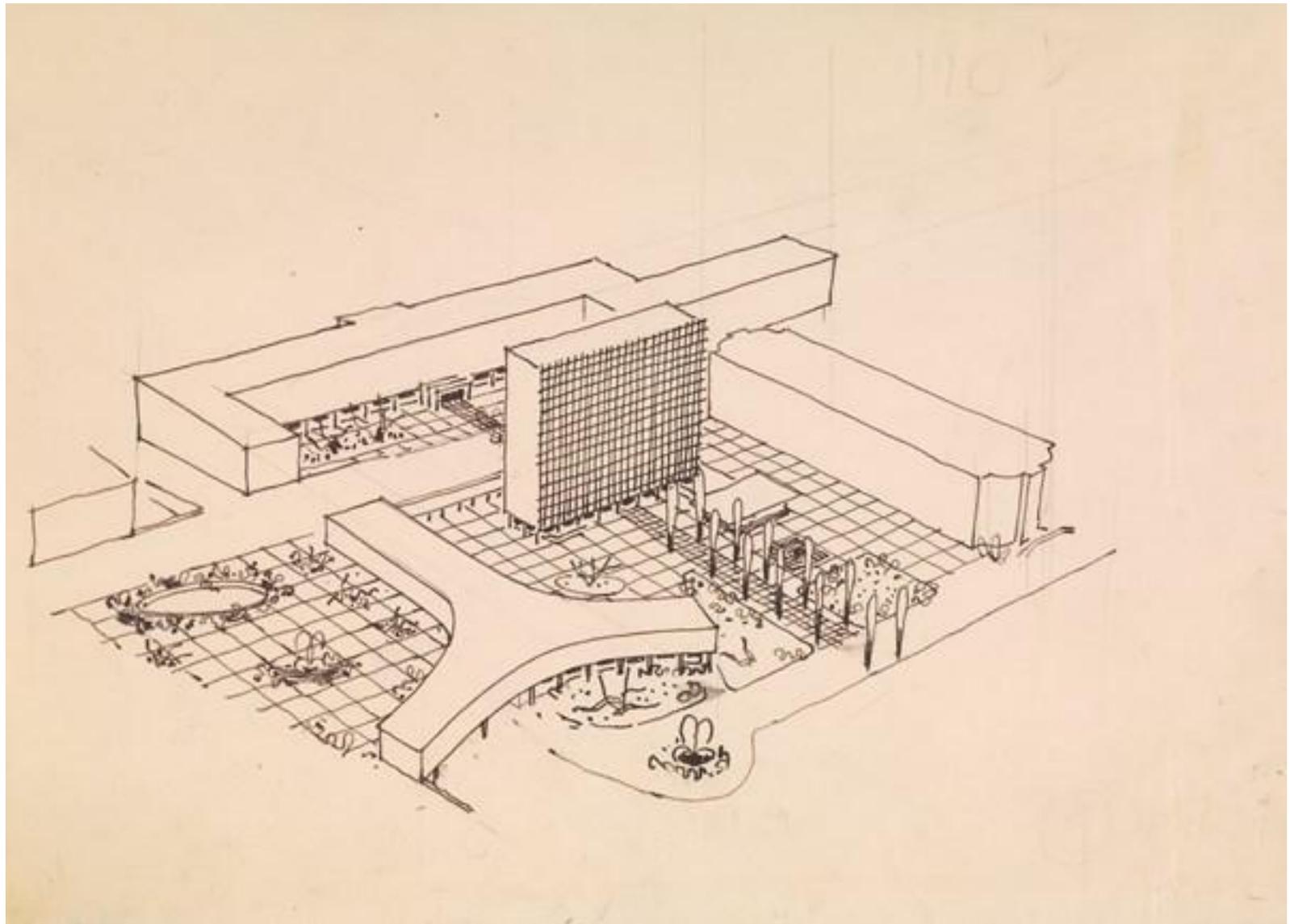
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Erling Viksjø, Project of the new Government Quarter, 1957-1958, Architecture Collections, The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design.  
Photo: Andreas Harvik. Copyright: The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design.



Erling Viksjø, Interior, Y-block, Government Quarter, c. 1970.  
Photo: Bjørn Winsnes, Architecture Collections, The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design. Copyright:  
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Pablo Picasso with photographs of his decorations, Government Quarter, 1958-60.  
Photo: Carl Nesjar, Architecture Collections, The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design. Copyright:  
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*Y-block and H-block, 2014,  
Photo: Olaf Steen, ICOMOS Norway*



*Y-block proposed for demoliton, 2014,  
Photo: Olaf Steen, ICOMOS Norway*



*H-block and Y-block, 2014,  
Photo: Olaf Steen, ICOMOS Norway*