

CHAPTER 2

The Unknown Garden City

People have heard about Oslo's garden cities – not least Ullevål Garden City and Lille Tøyen Garden City, which are architectural pearls and attractive places to live, both built in brick. Sinsen Garden City is different because it is newer and less known, hemmed in like a small slice of cake between the “Sinsen Traffic Machine” and local roads Lørenveien and Sinsenveien. But this is also one of Oslo's well-planned idyllic small neighborhoods.¹⁰⁹

I am reminded of the unknown status of Sinsen Garden City almost every time I try to describe the whereabouts of my home. Even taxi drivers, who should know the city's geography better than anyone, give me questioning looks in return. Normally I have to use the “Sinsen Traffic Machine”, an interchange that is one of Oslo's most notorious infrastructural landmarks,¹¹⁰ the local primary school, the local church, or the local main road, Lørenveien, as navigational props. Another issue is that most people immediately associate the name “Sinsen” with Sinsen City [*Sinsenbyen*], a large neighborhood just south of the railway lines, planned and built during the same period.¹¹¹ Unlike Sinsen Garden City, this is dominated by concrete architecture clad in brick – a modernist housing project

109 Translated from: “Oslos hagebyer har folk hørt om – ikke minst Ullevål hageby og Lille Tøyen hageby, arkitektoniske perler og attraktive boområder, begge steder murbebyggelse. Sinsen hageby skiller seg ut, er nyere og ikke like kjent der den ligger som et lite kakestykke mellom Sinsenkrysset, Lørenveien og Sinsenveien, men dette er en av Oslos gjennomtenkte, små idyller.” In Trond Lepperød, “Historien om Sinsen Hageby,” *sinsenboeren.blogspot.com*, accessed November 28, 2021, <http://sinsenboeren.blogspot.com/2018/01/historien-om-sinsen-hageby.html>).

110 There is an extensive analysis of this particular traffic landmark in my doctoral thesis: Even Smith Wergeland, “From Utopia to Reality: The Motorway as a Work of Art” (PhD diss., Oslo School of Architecture and Design, 2013), 348–364.

111 Sinsen City was designed by the architects Kristofer Lange and Thoralf Christian Hauff, and developed by a company called Brødrene Johnsen [the Johnsen Brothers], a local real estate and construction firm. Most of the scheme was completed between 1935 and 1939. See Helge Iversen, ed., *Sinsneboka* (Oslo: Sinsen Menighetsråd, 1981), 29–31.

typical of the architectural trends in Oslo at the time. Prior to its creation, the land belonged to a historical farm at Sinsen, Sinsen Farm [*Sinsen Gård*], which the wealthy Schou family sold to a building company called the Johnsen Brothers [*Brødrene Johnsen*] in 1934. They wasted no time: Three construction stages, 2,500 flats and 10,000 people were all in place by 1939 (Fig. 15). It was the largest construction project in Norway at the time and must have looked rather impressive upon its completion.¹¹²



Figure 15. A photo of Sinsen City in the late 1930s, when the neighborhood was brand new. Photo: Karl Harstad/Oslo Museum. Reproduced with the permission of the Oslo Museum; this image cannot be reused without permission.

The remote location, relatively speaking, explains why connectivity was a major theme whenever the development of Sinsen Garden City was mentioned in Oslo newspapers from 1929 onwards. One advertisement promises to get you “Home in 11 minutes from the main square in Oslo to Sinsen Garden City”.¹¹³ The downside of this convenience, however,

¹¹² Iversen, 28–31.

¹¹³ Translated from: “Hjem på 11 min. fra Stortorget til Sinsen haveby.” In “Hjem på 11 min.,” *Aftenposten*, March 28, 1934, 12.

was the presence of three major traffic arteries to the north, west and south of the garden city: Trondheimsveien, Ring Road 3 and two railroad tracks. Those barriers have been there almost from the start and they have expanded over the years.¹¹⁴ They provide mobility, but they also bring noise and physical isolation. Sinsen Garden City has been a green, secret haven surrounded by traffic machinery ever since it first emerged.



Figure 16. Aerial photo of Sinsen Garden City, 1952. Photo: Widerøes Flyveselskap/Otto Hansen, © Oslo byarkiv. Reproduced with the permission of Oslo byarkiv; this image cannot be reused without permission.

From Farmland to Urban Fabric

Just like the Sogn area, Sinsen was under the jurisdiction of Aker municipality when the garden city idea was hatched. The head of planning, August Nielsen, had a clear vision of Aker's future:

¹¹⁴ In 2005, when the Sinsen Interchange was rebuilt and connected to a new tunnel system, 14 of the original Sinsen Garden City single-family homes were demolished in order to create more space for the road system. This operation caused a great deal of turmoil in the garden city before and after. See "Hus og Hager Må Vike for Ring 3-Tunnel," *Aftenposten*, February 23, 2003, 6.

The old farmer's mentality still remains strong within the population. To dwell freely in separate houses is what the general public desires. [...] Residential requirements shall therefore be covered by detached houses freely located in the terrain, as in a park. The Residential City of Aker is supposed to be a green city with an imminent presence of fields and trees, for all to behold. Both individual houses and tenements will be placed according to this vision.¹¹⁵

This contextual backdrop is important for three reasons: 1. The idea of Aker as a deliberate contrast to the ongoing densification of Oslo's inner city, "the high-rise city"¹¹⁶ as Nielsen termed it; 2. The importance of balancing individual and collective solutions, in and outside the home. Not every house could be a single-family unit; and 3. The need for variation in order to avoid monotonous environments.

The mission of delivering such qualities at Sinsen was given to Einar Smith and Edgar Smith Berentsen, an uncle and nephew separated in age by 32 years. They were two generations of architects in the same office, which they ran together from 1925 to 1930, when Smith passed away at the age of 67. He had previously run an office with his half-brother Ove Ekman, also an architect, and they carried out several large projects together from 1890 onwards, especially after the recruitment of another architectural partner, Carl Michalsen, in 1910. Michalsen's son Eystein was later appointed to the firm, which was a real family enterprise.¹¹⁷ When Smith left the office to team up with his nephew in 1925, he still kept it within the family.

The nephew, unlike his uncle (who was born and died in Oslo), was born abroad and died abroad, in the US and Spain respectively. His father worked as a medical doctor in Chicago and Minneapolis, and Smith Berentsen did not move to Norway until he was a teenager. He then

115 Translated from: "Den gamle bondementalitet hos befolkningen er ennu sterk, og ønsket om å bo fritt er alment. [...] Behovet for boliger skal dekkes ved hus liggende fritt plassert i terrenget som i en park. Boligbyen Aker skal være en grønnby hvor man alltid kan se at engang var her jorder og trær, og efter dette syn skal både villaer og leiegårder plasseres." In August Nielsen, *Aker 1837-1937* (Oslo: Aker Kommune, 1947), 451.

116 Translated from: "den høibebyggede by." In Nielsen, 451.

117 Unfortunately, there are few written sources on Einar Smith except Wikipedia and Store Norske Leksikon, which I have used here: "Einar Smith," Wikipedia, accessed January 13, 2022, https://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/Einar_Smith#cite_note-7, and "Einar Smith," Store Norske Leksikon, accessed January 13, 2022, https://nkl.snl.no/Einar_Smith. The same applies to his nephew.

proceeded to study architecture, in Trondheim and in Paris, and joined forces with his uncle after graduation, first in the existing office with Ekman and the Michalsens, then in a partnership with his uncle. Smith Berentsen also worked briefly for Lars Backer, one of Norway's first modernist architects, and the Aker Planning Department.¹¹⁸ The latter gave him a direct connection to the planning activities that August Nielsen was about to launch. It is likely that the combination of the uncle's experience and the nephew's fresh expertise and network landed them the commission of making a zoning plan for Sinsen Garden City.

Despite intensive archival research, I have not been able to trace the exact circumstances. There seems to have been a division between the public interests of Aker municipality, which wanted to create more residential areas, and the private interests of Olaf Løken, an Oslo-based mason who took charge of the whole process of selling the plots in addition to much of the initial construction work. Løken can be described as a hybrid between a salesman and a constructor, what we would call an entrepreneurial type today. Through his company, A/S Standardbygg, he controlled operations to a great extent and sometimes appeared as an interview object, acting as an official spokesperson for the Garden City. In May 1935, under the heading "Sinsen Garden City in full flow",¹¹⁹ Løken talked about the marvelous views, the practical economic arrangements and the "colossal" improvements in building standards compared to earlier examples in Oslo – everything, essentially, that had been promised in the earlier newspaper advertisements (Fig. 17).

Sinsen Garden City was developed according to a zoning plan that was approved in 1929,¹²⁰ followed by the division into lots a year later.¹²¹ Smith and Smith Berentsen were in charge of both procedures. Interestingly, as shown in a rendering of the model of the entire plan (Fig. 18), Sinsen City

118 "Edgar Smith Berentsen," Wikipedia, accessed January 13, 2022, https://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edgar_Smith_Berentsen, and "Edgar Smith Berentsen," Store Norske Leksikon, accessed January 13, 2022 https://nkl.sn.no/Edgar_Smith_Berentsen.

119 "Sinsen Haveby er i Skuddet," *Akersposten*, May 31, 1935, p. 3.

120 Unfortunately, this plan appears to be missing from the municipal archives but the official archival entry is as follows: Aker Reguleringsråd, Sinsen – Regulerings- og bebyggelsesplan for en del av området – Vedtatt 14.08.1929 av Reguleringsrådet i sak 14018/29.

121 Iversen, *Sinsenboka*, 28.



Figure 17. A newspaper advertisement from November 1932 announcing the arrival of Sinsen Garden City. Photo: © Dagbladet. Reproduced with the permission of Dagbladet; this image cannot be reused without permission.

was included in the regulation plan; perhaps not formally, but at least for contextual purposes. This demonstrates an awareness right from the start about the mutual dependence of these areas.

The plan for the garden city included space for 124 individual buildings with roughly a quarter of an acre of land for each property. This was broadly announced in the newspapers in 1929 and 1930 through several recurring advertisements with the same message: “Sinsen Garden City, housing lots for sale on the border of the city with a lovely view of the townscape and the fjord.”¹²² Other newspaper entries stressed the convenient location at the outer limits of the city and the beginning of the countryside, in close proximity to modern roads and traffic junctions. Although the garden city was not entirely complete until 1940, the development was still quite rapid. By October 1930, seven houses had already

¹²² Translated from: “Sinsen Haveby, tomter til salgs, beliggende like ved bygrensen med herlig utsikt over by og fjord.” In “Sinsen Haveby,” *Aftenposten*, July 26, 1929, 5.

Den store utparsellering på Sinsen

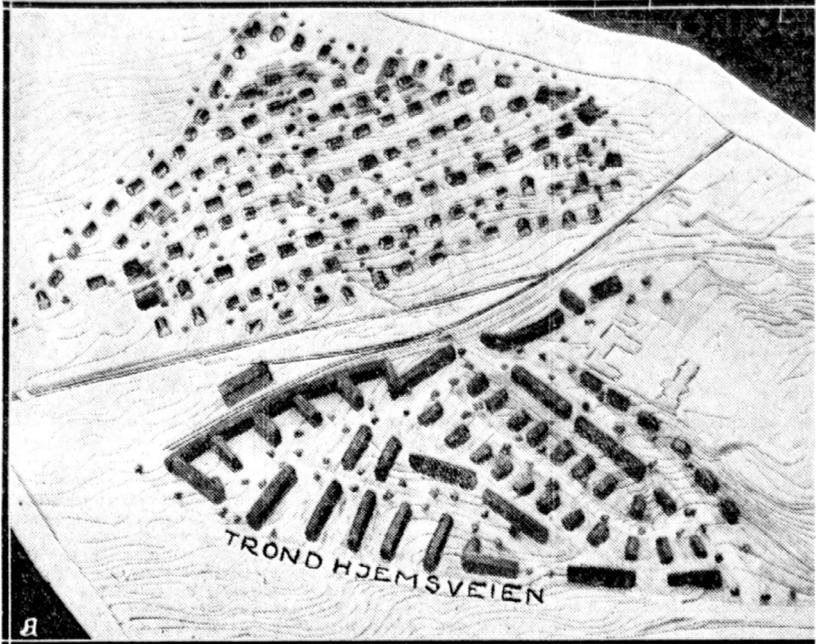


Figure 18. The zoning for Sinsen Garden City north of the railroads and Sinsen City south of the railroads, as displayed in *Aftenposten*, October 30, 1930. Photo: © Aftenposten. Reproduced with the permission of Aftenposten; this image cannot be reused without permission.

been built, and local roads, sewerage systems, water supplies and power supplies were underway. The archive reveals that the project ran smoothly, driven by the architects – who designed all the early houses plus a set of catalog drawings for future use¹²³ – in collaboration with the garden city board and Olaf Løken. The first newspaper articles mention the sensible location of commercial buildings in relation to homes and the careful coordination of the color and shape of the buildings.

While small in scale compared to Ebenezer Howard’s original template, Sinsen Garden City nevertheless had the stature of a larger settlement and several recognizable garden city features, such as the relative diversity of functions. When the elementary school and the high school were completed, in 1938 and 1939 respectively, it looked like a proper community. Both schools were designed by the Bergen-born architect Georg

123 “Sinsen Haveby,” *Akers Vel*, October 2, 1931, 2.

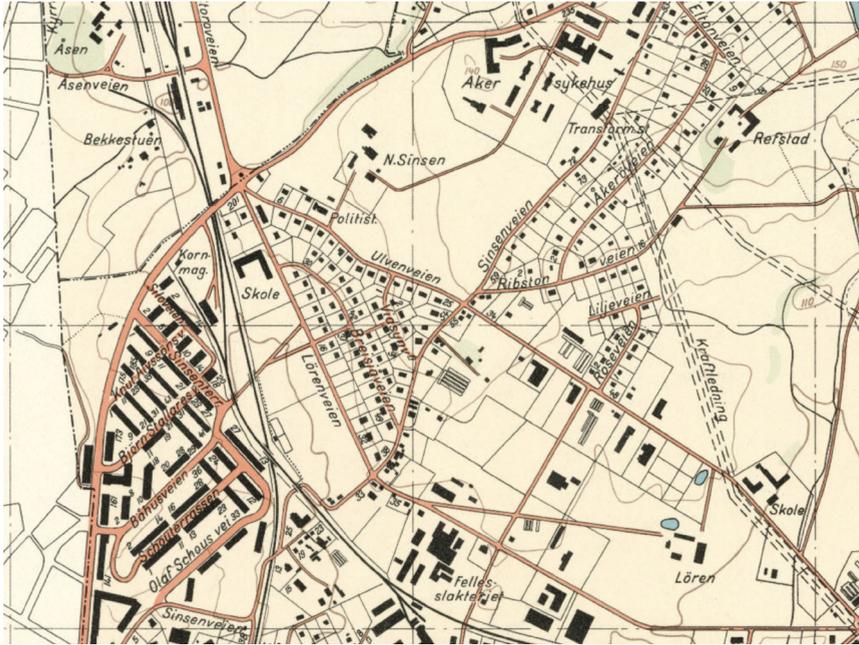


Figure 19. A map of the Municipality of Aker, 1938, with Sinsen Garden City almost in the center. Photo: Oslo byarkiv, https://www.oslo.kommune.no/OBA/Kart/1938/images/Blad_2.jpg.

Greve – a prominent figure in the Norwegian architectural scene in the interwar period – who in many ways epitomized the mixture of tradition and modernity that defines the architectural identity of Sinsen Garden City.

Solid and Practical Architecture

The earliest houses within the planning area were built before zoning approval had been given. The first house was erected in 1902 as a home for the composer Johannes Haarklou, designed by Carl Michalsen eight years before he went into partnership with Einar Smith. This was neoclassical architecture with a touch of the Swiss chalet style, which was hugely popular in Norwegian architecture in the latter half of the 19th century. It was converted into a local police station in 1911, a function it fulfilled until 1969. After that, it remained in use as a residence until 2005, when it was demolished along with 13 other houses when the Ring Road 3 Tunnel was constructed between Sinsen and Økern.



Figure 20a. Sinsen Garden City viewed from the school roof in the late 1930s.
Photo: photographer unknown, J.H. K enholdt A.S/Oslo Museum.



Figure 20b. Sinsen Garden City viewed from the school roof in June 2022.
Photo: Even Smith Wergeland.   Even Smith Wergeland.

The other two existing buildings, both erected in 1920, are the same timber houses that are still located in the far western corner of the area. The buildings from 1920 were originally owned by the state and built to accommodate clerks who worked for the National Directorate for Provisions [*Statens provianteringsdirektorat*]. These two houses, both designed by the architect Gustav Guldbrandsen, have gable roofs with a steeper profile than the average roof in the garden city, where the majority of buildings have tented roofs, which are polygon hipped roofs with a fairly gentle slope downwards to the walls. Some have pyramid roofs, which are the same as tented roofs but with a square base.

The newspapers of Aker and Oslo monitored progress on Sinsen Garden City as it began to take form. According to a feature article in *Akersposten*, “The houses are pretty and simple, and the location is beautiful.”¹²⁴ Clearly, this was not thought of as magnificent architecture. It was rather viewed as a useful contribution to the ongoing expansion of Oslo and a convenient way of managing the consequential population growth in Aker. In many ways, this was about as everyday as architecture can be—an early modern vernacular, an “intermediate form” of housing that foreshadowed other housing typologies across Norway in the decades to come.¹²⁵

There was a lot of discussion at the time on how to combine the best elements from European and Nordic architecture. An organization called *Nordisk Bygningsdag* [the Nordic Building Association] hosted a series of conferences on Nordic building culture, and the third event in the series was held in Oslo between June 16–18 1938. A printed report was issued afterwards, in which the building policy of Aker was mentioned in favorable terms.¹²⁶ There is no specific reference to Sinsen Garden City but Aker received general praise for its high-standard, effortlessly modern housing architecture. That is a precise summary of what the municipality was aiming for and is an accurate description of how Sinsen Garden City continued to develop during the 1930s.

124 Translated from: “Husene er pene og enkle, og beliggenheten er flott.” In “Det Nye Aker,” *Akersposten*, September 22, 1931, front page.

125 Bing and Johnsen, “Innledning: Nye Hjem i Mellomkrigstiden,” 20–22.

126 Harald Aars, Harald Hals and J. E. Orvin, eds. *Nordisk Bygningsdag* (Oslo: NBD, 1938).

There are few classical details to be seen on the houses that were built from the mid 1930s onwards, other than the absence of completely flat roofs. Many of the architects involved, for instance Christian Due Astrup, who designed a single-family home at Breisjåveien 38, can safely be placed within a modernist framework. Some of the older architects who were commissioned, like Einar Nilsen, who designed a horizontally-divided dual-family home on the property next to Astrup's house, ventured beyond their classical training at this point.

The most unifying architectural feature of Sinsen Hageby is the extensive use of timber as a cladding and construction material. Concrete and brick were also used, especially in basement structures and supporting structures between floors, but timber is the most common material. This conforms with the ideals of Norwegian architects at the time as discussed in the previous chapter, but it also points to debates in the present about climate in relation to building practices. Timber is considered nowadays as a renewable and sustainable building material, and this has sparked a revival of interest in using it.¹²⁷ Not only does it have a lighter carbon footprint than brick, steel and concrete, it also has a significant potential in regard to maintenance, which makes it durable and resilient. Maintenance, as Hillary Sample suggests, “will become increasingly important as architects adopt practices that are to affect environmental performance and also the making of environments.”¹²⁸

Although the architecture of Sinsen Garden City is modern, it has a connection to traditional Norwegian timber construction. The keywords are quality wood, craftsmanship and maintenance. If the basis is sound, sustainability can be maintained through simple actions. The houses of Sinsen Garden City were marketed as “solid and practical” and the finished result has largely delivered what the advertisements promised. The roof of the house where my family lives dates from 1939 and has never been repaired. In 2022, after a couple of minor leaks beside the chimney, the housing association hired a construction company that specializes in

127 Jim Coulson, *A Handbook for the Sustainable Use of Timber in Construction* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2020).

128 Hillary Sample, *Maintenance Architecture* (London and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2016), 7.

traditional crafts to make a technical assessment. They confirmed that the entire roof can be repaired as it is, which means that the original brick roof tiles and the load-bearing timber structure can be preserved. Some tiles will have to be replaced and damage to the timber may be uncovered when restoration begins. But everything can be repaired and that is the point here: well-crafted timber buildings withstand the test of time exceptionally well.

For some jobs, like the roof repairs, professionals are needed. But another sustainable aspect of timber architecture of this kind is that it can be kept in good condition by the residents themselves, through fairly manageable caretaking routines like painting and other forms of damage prevention. Of course, not everyone likes to carry out maintenance and it can cost more than you expect, but it is nevertheless a fairly small sacrifice. Most people who own a property accept the investment and effort it takes to care for it, especially since good maintenance is favorable for the economy as well as the environment.



Figure 21a. Lørenveien 2, a prayer house in 1956. Photo: Leif Ørnelund/Oslo Museum (OB.Ø56/1569).



Figure 21b. Lørenveien 2 in 2022, a locale for cultural activities for teenagers.
Photo: Even Smith Wergeland. © Even Smith Wergeland.

Not every house is made from timber, however. In fact, a closer look at Sinsen Garden City reveals a number of discrepancies that makes it difficult to define conclusively. Two buildings stand out completely due to the choice of materials: brick instead of timber. One of them is situated at Lørenveien 2 (Fig. 21), which currently serves as a locale for cultural activities for teenagers. It was originally built to be a prayerhouse and residence, custom-made to suit that combination in 1937 by Hugo A. Brustad, who was an architect and mason. He created a support system of brick and cast-concrete decks, and the façade was painted brick. The building was described thus in *Aftenposten* in 1941: “At the very entrance to Sinsen Garden City stands a strange brick house. It has a huge chimney above the gable and two covered side entrances.”¹²⁹ How very strange indeed. The other oddity in the neighborhood is a brick house at Breisjåveien 33, designed by architect Trygve Gierløff. This single-family residence was commissioned by a mason, Holst-Larsen, who had formal responsibility for the building application. He thereby had a direct influence on the construction system and finishings.

129 Translated from: “Ved selve entreen til Sinsen Haveby står et pussig murhus. Det har en svær pipe over gavlen og to overbyggede sideinnganger.” In “Sinsen Haveby,” *Aftenposten*, April 25, 1941, 3.

Such deviations from the norm demonstrate that there was a degree of variation as Sinsen Garden City progressed from proposal to realization. This is hardly surprising since the process involves different architects, developers, builders and clients. If you add to that the intricate mix of housing types, from single-family to multi-family homes, it becomes more understandable that these garden cities have appeared “confusing” in the eyes of some beholders, even if the term is inaccurate. On top of this are the changes that have taken place over the years, such as the replacement of original buildings with new building types, for instance the two dual-family residences that replaced Astrup’s single-family home at Breisjåveien 38 in 2016.

This particular process fueled a series of complaints by the Sinsen Residents’ Association, which submitted a number of official protests as the case went through the system. An important point of reference were the regulations for building individual houses in Oslo [*Småhusplanen*].¹³⁰ According to these regulations, argued the Residents’ Association, areas like Sinsen Garden City were supposed to be governed with architectural harmony and structural consistency in mind, to prevent “alien objects” like apartment buildings and other forms of housing with multiple units. This argument failed to convince the Plan and Building Department, however, and as the Municipal Office for Cultural Heritage Management did not find Astrup’s home worthy of protection, the proposal went ahead.¹³¹ Similar procedures have taken place elsewhere in Sinsen Garden City too, mainly during the 2000s. The overall plan for individual houses has been a source of much debate over the past 20 years. One of the major issues is the balance between development and densification on the one hand, and the existing values and local character on the other, as I will come back to in Chapter 3.

130 This plan first gained political approval in 1997 and has subsequently been revised in 2006 and 2013, with additional guidelines and recommendations added in 2016 and 2019. The plan as a whole is currently undergoing a complete revision.

131 Detailed information about the complaints, the authorities’ response and the process as a whole can be found in the official building applications: “Breisjåveien 38 – Oppføring av tomannsbolig – Hus A” <https://innsyn.pbe.oslo.kommune.no/saksinnsyn/casedet.asp?caseno=201515116>, “Breisjåveien 38 – Oppføring av tomannsbolig – Hus B” <https://innsyn.pbe.oslo.kommune.no/saksinnsyn/casedet.asp?caseno=201515150>, and “Breisjåveien 38 – Riving av enebolig” <https://innsyn.pbe.oslo.kommune.no/saksinnsyn/casedet.asp?caseno=201515108>.

Common people?

If the architecture of Sinsen Garden City can be described as solid with a dash of class, then the first generation of residents can be described as common folk with a degree of affluence. They typically ran small businesses, or worked as teachers, clerks, or other typical middle-class jobs.¹³² As I have touched upon earlier, the entrance ticket was not affordable for everyone. The buyers had to cover 20% of the building costs in cash and thereafter commit to a combination of a mortgage on the open market combined with a bond loan at 6% interest. The whole operation was administrated by a private limited company, which probably made it easier for each owner to handle the economic model.¹³³ But only for those who had the financial resources to hurdle past the basic costs.

Unlike the selection of Norwegian garden cities that were initiated through municipal support and/or cooperative solutions,¹³⁴ Sinsen Garden City was solely based on the economic framework developed by Løken, who had to make a profit on top of footing the construction bills. The pragmatic “solution” to previous garden city failures seems to have been a change of demographic attention, from the working classes to the middle classes, specifically those employed in clerical jobs [*funksjonærklassen*]. A survey of the distribution of trades in Oslo, based on the 1930 Census, shows that the clerical sector was overrepresented in the western part of the city. Areas like Ullevål and Nordberg – both part of Sogn Garden City – had more clerks than workers and foremen combined.¹³⁵

But who were the clerks, exactly? According to Michael Hopstock, this group is notoriously difficult to categorize, simply because it is highly diverse in both economic and social terms. In Hopstock’s study of Holtet Garden City in Oslo, the clerks gravitate towards a working-class identity – as *laborers* they have much in common with their working-class neighbors.¹³⁶ The geographic origin of the residents, the specifics of their

132 Iversen, *Sinsensboka*, 28.

133 The terms are mentioned in several newspaper articles and they vary a bit in terms of figures and accuracy. This entry goes into more detail than the others: “Sinsen Haveby er i Skuddet,” *Akersposten*, May 31, 1935, 3.

134 Bing and Johnsen, “Innledning: Nye Hjem i Mellomkrigstiden,” 21.

135 Oslo Reguleringsvesen, *Generalplan for Oslo* (Oslo: Oslo Kommune, 1960), 61.

136 Hopstock, “Holtet Hageby – En Rød Bydel?” 133.

work environment and the neighborhood culture may have counted as much as income and education level in the formation of class identity at Holtet. Based on the occupational status listed by the clients in the building applications,¹³⁷ it seems unlikely that the first residents of Sinsen Garden City had a similar affiliation with the working classes. But the majority were “common people” who probably regarded themselves as regular workers, in the broad sense of the term. The privileges of living in Sinsen Garden City must have been evident at the time – a convenient location, comfortable housing, garden spaces for all, a spacious park, two schools and more – but the area was not as exclusive as it is today.

Outdoor Life, All Year Round

The essence of Sinsen Garden City, both then and now, is its green character. Or, to be more precise, the spaces that are green during spring and summer, multi-colored during the fall and grey or white during winter. Oslo is a city where the cycle of the seasons is truly noticeable, and the garden cities are places where the seasonal changes can be observed on each property as well as in the common spaces. The whole spectrum of seasonal qualities must be taken into consideration if the landscape dimension is to be described properly.

The best example at Sinsen is the park between the two schools, Sinsenjordet (Fig. 22), a remnant of the old Sinsen Farm. This has served as a public space ever since buildings started to emerge on either side of the railroad lines and was formalized as a park and recreational space through a zoning plan in 1948. Various plans have been launched over the years to create more designated space for sports, but the only sports venues that exist today are the courts of the Sinsen Tennis Club and a sand court for beach volleyball beside them. The volleyball court used to be a skating rink for ice skating and ice hockey. Other than that, the park is an open space for free use, physical activity or purely recreational purposes. Besides the connection to the old Sinsen Farm, which means

¹³⁷ The clients' occupations are not listed in every case. A more precise answer to this question would demand further demographic and sociological inquiry.



Figure 22. Sinsenjordet, the local park, in June 2022. Photo: Even Smith Wergeland.
© Even Smith Wergeland.

that a crucial piece of the cultural history is still present, the park also has a World War II memorial in remembrance of all the local Jews who were deported to concentration camps during the war. The park is, in other words, a hugely important landmark and an invaluable asset for people who live in the area. It is a place where children can play, teenagers can hang out and adults can socialize outdoors, relieved for a while from work duties, social media and computer screens.

This sort of neighborhood value was recognized and prioritized during the process that led to the 1929 General Plan for Oslo. For Harald Hals and his colleagues, it was crucial to maintain the park-like character of Oslo, especially the five valleys that defined the landscape historically. A remainder of one of those, Torshovdalen, is located just west of Sinsen, and Sinsenjordet has the same sloping terrain. The importance of skiing is mentioned several times in the General Plan – a very “Norwegian” desire, and definitely a typical Oslo phenomenon.¹³⁸ Sinsen Garden City, with its own little slope for skiing and sledding, is a living example of this legacy.

¹³⁸ Oslo Kommune, *Stor-Oslo. Forslag til Generalplan*, 203.

Legacy Issues

Oslo's "unknown" garden city is not listed as a cultural environment like several of the others, but approximately one third of the properties appear on the Yellow List [*Gul liste*], which is a municipal register of objects and areas with known cultural heritage value. Unlike heritage objects with a legislative status, the properties at Sinsen do not have formal protection. The Yellow List makes sure that every building application has to be processed by the Municipal Office for Cultural Heritage Management. The Office can make recommendations but does not have the direct authority to prevent things from happening.

It is probably more accurate to say that Sinsen Garden City is partially protected. Changes have occurred, as mentioned, but it would be surprising if the whole structure comes under pressure as a potential zone for *tabula rasa* urbanism. A lot has been built in the surrounding areas over the past decades, most notably in Løren, and the next wave of urban development will be located further east, in Økern. In light of the latest version of the regulations for building individual houses in Oslo, which is currently under revision, it seems less likely that neighborhoods like Sinsen Garden City will be singled out as densification zones. The revised version builds on a clear ambition to prevent further densification of areas with detached housing.

This raises new discussions on the garden city legacy. It has been a fairly common point of view to regard the garden city as "something of a museum piece,"¹³⁹ as Buder suggested in 1990. If more protective overall zoning is approved in Oslo, the museum-like character of Sinsen Garden City will perhaps become more apparent. But there are reasons beyond architecture to argue that Sinsen Garden City is not a museum. The environmental cause has catapulted the garden city and similar green concepts into the limelight again as vital resources in the city. Buder saw the contours of this revival when he glanced into the garden city future in 1990: "Still the challenges to the environment could, in time, force a reconsideration of our present values and the cities and suburbs they have created." He could hardly have been more prophetic.

139 Buder, *Visionaries and Planners*, 211.

Another topic of great significance is the relationship between sustainability and livability. A key question in urban development up until now has been as follows: What do we need to sacrifice in the existing environment in order to improve the city? Cities have always made sacrifices in times of rapid change. Sinsen Garden City is no exception to that rule. On the contrary, it once displaced a historically important farm and valuable agricultural soil. If such an act of destruction is going to be justified, the replacement must be of high quality and societal value. Now that circular economy principles are being applied to planning and architecture,¹⁴⁰ the value of everything that already exists increases. One consequence is that old buildings are being recognized more widely as part of the environmental cause. This makes it harder to defend wasting resources even if the motivation is a higher building standard. At a strategic level, *tabula rasa* urbanism is being challenged by *tabula plena* urbanism,¹⁴¹ which focuses on urban sites that are already occupied by buildings and ecosystems. Instead of demolition, this strategy seeks to care for resources that have accumulated over time by optimizing them, for instance through transformation, adaptive reuse or other preservation techniques. This development is important to bear in mind ahead of the last chapter, since the choice between replacement or preservation lies at the core of the debate about urban desirability and suburban livability. What a city desires, from a professional planning perspective, is not necessarily the same as what the citizens want – the crux of what Neuman calls “the urban desirability versus suburban livability paradox”,¹⁴² to which I shall soon return.

140 Hilde Remøy, Alexander Wandl, Denis Ceric and Arjan van Timmeren, “Facilitating Circular Economy in Urban Planning”, *Urban Planning* 4, no. 3 (2019): 1–4.

141 Bryony Roberts, ed., *Tabula Plena. Forms of Urban Preservation* (Basel: Lars Müllers Publishers, 2016).

142 Neuman, “The Compact City Fallacy,” 12,

