

Rotfeste

Rural Web of Connections

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My work aims to provide an opportunity for young adults to realize their dream of a home in the countryside. My clients are young adults that are already motivated to settle in the districts, but my project turned with the potential to appeal for a wider range of clients, such as the municipality, local businesses, and other than young adults that struggles to enter the housing market or that is satisfied with a smaller dwelling with more shared commodities. The concept for the design is to focus it on the activities, the use and the rural lifestyle that appeals to many within my client group. The ambition is to experiment with a new approach to designing homes in the districts.

I've called my project "Rotfeste" which can be translated to "take root", but the term holds more than I'm capable to translate. The word describes the roots of a plant, or mor precisely the ability the root has to attach to the ground. When a sapling is planted, it needs time and the right conditions to establish. It is also commonly used similar to the English translation "to be grounded" or "down to earth". I chose the title because that is what my project aims to provide, the right conditions for taking root.

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Introduction

The project and concept evolved to shape itself as two architectural projects, on two sites, but in the same town. Two completely different sites meant to show and explore how my findings and developed concept could and would unfold differently on different sites. The concept aims to give the young that already are motivated to settle in the districts the possibility to enter the housing market and pursue the dream that fueled the motivation. To give a taste of the rural lifestyle, include them in the local community, and appreciate the qualities and opportunities that resides in the districts of Norway. A springboard of sorts.

The house as a workshop

The heart of my project is the idea of the house as a workshop. Or one could say the home as a workshop. Houses and homes are used differently in the rural areas, I set out to try figuring out what these differences could be, and how the architecture responds to it. How can it respond? What inspired me to follow this course is the way traditional farms in Norway was organized. The home far exceeded the walls of the house and even the farm and the fields surrounding it. It stretched from the fjord to the mountain. This gave access to all resources necessary to survive. It's tempting to romanticize the traditional rural life, and I want to assure you that it is not my intention, but I think many of the young people that answer that they are motivated to settle in the districts has this romanticized dream about a rural lifestyle. To figure out which part of this lifestyle is appealing, I set out to investigate which traces of this I could find among the people already living in the countryside.

My experience from living in the countryside is that the house functions as a workshop for many people all the way from the bed to the sea, the farm, or the forest. The flow of space from outside to inside behaves completely differently. This is a quality I very much appreciated and would like to investigate how could be developed further and be translated in to how we build modern houses today. Though the occupations and activities that demanded the house to work with or/and as a workshop are not as common as they once were, and for many, daily life has become more similar to urban life. I think the potential in this perspective isn't fully explored, and that it could hold many values worth keeping/reintroducing into the future of rural life.

To investigate this topic, I made a series of portraits of different cases where this is present or not present. They do not prove or provide an objective scientific answer in any way. But they illustrate an aspect of rural life that has to be considered when planning and designing housing in the districts. I do not claim that everyone lives like this, but I try to interpret the listed motivations from the research from Distriktssenteret(Nordtug. 2021) and illustrate it in actual cases. The stories from the portraits show an incredible connection between the house and the activities taking place outside the house, many of the activities overlapping, being both inside and outside. It's the idea of this connection and the activities that lay the foundation of my design decisions.

Site

I have chosen the municipality of Farsund as my site. This is where I grew up and therefore know it well, this I regard as a huge advantage, as long as I am aware of the impact it will have on my work, and that it challenges the objectivity of my work.

It is a relatively small/medium sized municipality south in Norway approximately 10 000 inhabitants. Its center, the city of Farsund, is a small city with around 3500 inhabitants. In addition, it also has two smaller towns, Vanse and Borhaug, as well as large rural areas. My two projects are located in Farsund city, but it is meant to reach out to the rural areas. The city is located at a peninsula and is surrounded by small fjords and a large archipelago in the east, smaller mountains, hills and forest in the north, flat fields with long beaches in the west (similar to the landscape in Denmark) and the open North Sea in the south. The city is at a crossing between the west coast landscape, the east coast landscape and the mountains, resulting in an incredibly diverse nature in close proximity of the city. This diversity in landscape, nature and resources give opportunities for a lot of different activities and relations, making it a perfect site for my work in my opinion.

Growth

The history of each town and how they grew to be a town differs a lot, it being an old trade of fish harbor, "hjørnestens" (cornerstone) factories or other industry, which made a village possible to expand. Then with the evolvement of technology these catalysators shifted. For example, cargo traffic moved from ships with sails to trucks on highways. The village who grew to be a small city from trading by sea, now lost its growth engine to the neighboring municipality who got the highway built through their village. I got the chance to participate in a local conference that discussed living attractivity in the region. In the debate at the end of the day the establishment of a big industry in the region would be the solution to attract people to settle in the region. It seems that this still is the main tool to generate growth to municipalities struggling with declining population numbers. I'm sure that it would attract people, but I'm not convinced it is a sustainable solution to the challenge. If a big industry were to settle, let's say with 500 jobs. At least 100 of those workers would be commuting from neighboring municipalities. Then the municipality is left with 400 new workers to house, provide public services, health and infrastructure. If you add the spouses and children of the workers to this number, the number might grow to over a thousand people. That's a 10% growth in a very short time! The repercussions of this establishment would be enormous, and a fresh boost for local shops etc. but for the municipality it would be an extremely difficult task to achieve. To accommodate the new settlers hundreds of housing units would have to be built, fast! Fast is usually the opposite of good and sustainable planning and design. Second there is the uncertainty of having a big proportion of the inhabitant's dependent on one commercial workplace. We see an example of this today, with the local cornerstone industry in Farsund, Alcoa, which is running on a third of its usual operation due to high energy costs. It is threatened to relocate, hundreds of workplaces gone in a moment. Then the town is left with empty homes, closing shops, and lowered tax income to maintain all the public services and infrastructure that was built when the industry was established. There must be a more sustainable way of solving these issues. Though my project does not aim to answer this question, it has been present in my discussion and work and is an example of how my project potentially could appeal to multiple clients other than young adults.

The new settlers need somewhere to work, don't get me wrong. The young adults who wish to live in my project need an income to survive and take part in the springboard effect I have ambitions to create. Small and medium firms make up 80% of Norway's commercial firms. A much more sustainable strategy, as if one or two firms close down, there would still be many left. New settlers might bring their idea and start up such a firm, if we serve other reasons to settle in the districts than big industrial work. An increasing amount of work is possible to do remotely, or by occasionally commuting. Therefore, facilities to be able to work remotely have a huge potential. Already many seize the opportunity to live in the countryside and work remotely from their workplace in the city. Both of my projects include or have high potential to facilitate flexible shared workstations in close proximity.

Why do this?

Macro

The world is facing an enormous challenge tackling the climate and nature crisis. With the building industry being one of the worst contributors to the problem, it is essential that we find new ways of building our homes and how we use them. One action to tackle this is to reduce the size of the buildings we build, reduce our need for spacious houses. My project is designed with small dwellings, but packed with quality, and access to shared spaces both indoor and outdoor. My clients are motivated to eventually live in a larger house with a garage and garden (Nordtug, 2021), but I'm confident that my projects have the potential to inspire people to live differently, or maybe provide a realization that a big house with a big footprint isn't necessary to achieve the lifestyle they have in mind.

Property has been the safest investment for years; the government has a strategy that everybody should own their home. Because of the safety of the investment, the investors are not only people and families investing in a home, but wealthy individuals and companies speculating for profit or renting out. This has resulted in higher prices for a home and made it difficult for new people to buy a home. The demographic has been divided into two groups, the ones onboard the housing market boat, and the ones that are not. With the project I try to make it easier to embark on this boat.

Meso

The districts suffer from the centralization that has been going on for years. The challenge to turn it becomes increasingly more difficult. The districts will have to find new ways of tackling this either as an attempt to turn it around or an attempt to settle with it. Housing is one of the areas that needs innovation to deal with this. The elderly wave will hit the districts harder than the cities; creative housing solutions might have the potential to ease the public services for elderly care. Establishing a connection and relations across age. My project is not only a springboard to the housing market, or into the rural lifestyle with its activities, it also aims to be a springboard into the local community.

Micro

The ones that decide to settle in the districts have their reasons and motivations for doing so and there is research showing the motivation for those that consider settling in the districts (Nordtug. 2021). Is these emphasized enough in the architecture in the districts? I want to put these in the center of the architecture and investigate where it leads. I believe the motivation is rooted in how people already live in the districts, so how do they live? I have investigated this in a series of talks with people living in the municipality of Farsund, both in the countryside and in town. The stories from this are gathered in a series of portraits, Pictures and an accompanying text, meant to formulate the connection between the house and the rural.

Personal Motivation

I find myself in a situation where I'm looking for together with my fiancé for a place to live. We have considered moving to the districts after studies but find it difficult to plan and find a way of entering the housing market or find suitable housing to rent. Therefore, I would be in the group I'm trying to reach in my project. This brings up the same issue described above about having the town I grew up in as a site, but it also gives me valuable reflections and motivation to figure this out.

Project sites

To experiment how architecture could enfold with the idea of "Rotfeste" (taking root), with the connections of rural activities as a foundation, I've chosen two sites. Two sites that differ from each other, with different qualities and different challenges. They are both located in Farsund city, one in the center and one in the periphery. It takes approximately eight minutes to walk between them. I chose they sites due to their difference from each other, and for the potential they hold. Another important factor is that they are unused buildings, with no clear plan for the future. Both are to a degree transformations, one being a complete transformation project, the other a partly renovation partly new built project.

Farsund Bilverksted

This is an old, abandoned car mechanics building. There has been little to no activity here since the cars. There is some attempt in merging it with the neighboring plot, tear it down and build apartments, but this has been in the talks for a long time without anything happening. The appearance of the building as it stands now in poor condition is a sad sight for most. But if you look beyond the broken glass and all the dirt, there is a really interesting building, with a lot of the industrial elements that are now a trending style. Especially the curved roof building could have some really interesting spatial qualities. The exterior could with some care give character to the area and provide a unique approach to the waterline in a city witch normally have either old idyllic sea houses, a promenade or a waterline filled with white glass fiber boats. A housing project based on transforming the building rather than tearing it down and replacing it with a standard apartment block seen in more urban cities, has been an excellent opportunity to explore new forms of living in the districts.



Storgaten 19

Storgaten 19 is an old "Swiss villa" located in the center of the city. It is one of the last sites in the city center that still has a garden of substantial size. The building is a combined living and commercial building, with a commercial ground floor and housing on the second and third floor. It is approximately 300sqm, with the total size of the plot being around 1000sqm. The neighboring plot is occupied by a bank in the North, and a park with a small cafe. It hasn't been used for housing in years, five years ago the municipality bought it with the ambition to build a car garage. These plans have been heavily debated in the local newspaper, both the action of tearing down an old villa with high historical value, but also if more parking lots is even necessary and if so, is this the right location. In this case my personal opinion affects my work, as I have the opinion to keep the old villa and that additional parking is not needed in the center of the town. To compromise on this, I decided to at least not remove any parking from the area, but rather put a lid on it and use the roof for my project.

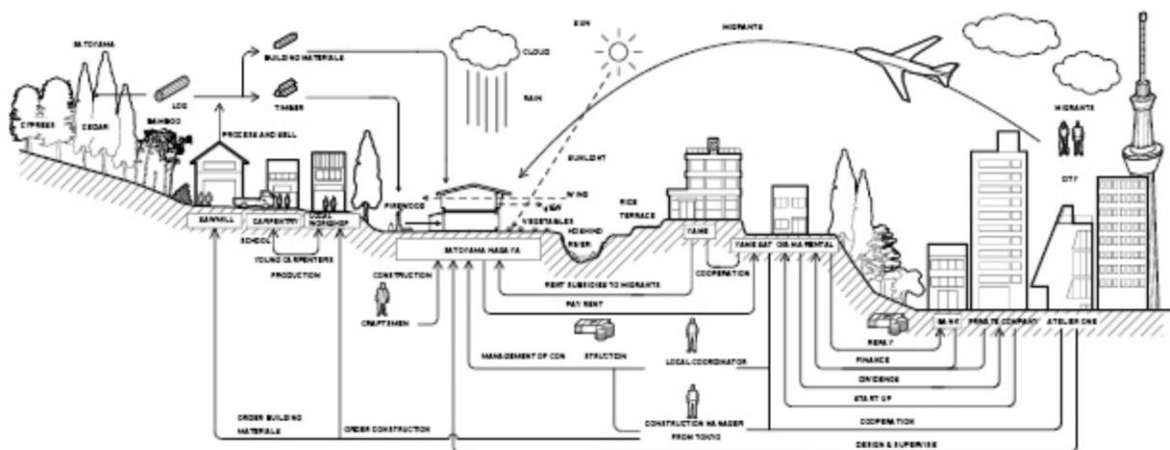


Picture: RAGNALD PETERSEN/ LISTA MUSEUM / AGDERBILDER.NO
([HTTPS://WWW.LISTER24.NO/REPORTASJE/I/MP6840/SVEITSERSTILBYEN-FARSUND-GJENOPPBYGGINGEN-ETTER-BYBRANNEN-I-1901](https://www.lister24.no/reportasje/i/mp6840/sveitserstilbyen-farsund-gjenoppbyggingen-etter-bybrannen-i-1901))

Inspiration



The reference project that put me on the path that followed and was a huge inspiration for me is a project by Atelier Bow-wow in Yame, Japan from 2018: Satoyama Nagaya Hoshinogawa. In this project the goal was to attract people from the city to the countryside, while building sustainable and use local traditional craftsmanship and products/materials.



Pictures: Atelier Bow-Wow / A+T Is This Rural

The main inspiration was the concept of a springboard house entering the countryside, but also the complexity of the simplicity of their design. There are individual apartments that work independently, with outdoor spaces that could function as private, but also afford the possibility to be common. In the front there is plenty of space, seemingly empty, but by that has the potential to host common activities only the imagination limits. I would say it's not a co-housing project, but it holds many qualities that the concept of co-housing value. Qualities one lacks in so many housing projects being built today, be it co-housing or not.

Post Design Reflections

After spending months working on this project, I'm confident I got closer to an alternative for how to build housing in the districts. I discovered qualities that are too promising to let pass by. I believe I managed to design something different without being radical, but down to earth and rather simple. I told the audience, when presenting my diploma topic at a local conference, that maybe the alternative doesn't have to be that complicated, as in the project by Atelier Bow-Wow, and I think I managed to pack it in to an understandable and intuitive design.

This said, there have been challenges and times that I've questioned myself, like the fact that I only designed 7 apartments in a plot where its already approved plans for 22. Or when I choose to design what could be a 90s facade in a historical Swiss-style town. I have asked myself if I'm designing homes for a small group of people, but they realized that if so, that small amount of people needs a home as well. Though I have concluded that I think my concept appeals to a large enough group to be worth a try.

Another thing that's been on my mind is which part of architecture my proposed concept touches upon. My designs are influenced by my architectural taste, my personal motivation, how I would like to live and what I need in the current life situation I find myself in now: soon to graduate (hopefully), young, wondering if I should stay in the city or move to the countryside. It's been hard for me to separate these things from the concept I propose, and I can confidently say I didn't manage. I believe my concept could be translated to other architectural expressions, but you need an architectural expression to formulate the concept. Then it is up for interpretations, like I interpreted Atelier Bow-Wow's project.

I now leave it up for you to interpretate.

- Jarand Ellingsen Roalkvam
12.06.2024

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