
The Norwegian national memorial process after July 22, 2011

Five months after the bombing of the government center in Oslo and the killings at Utøya the Norwegian government made public its decision to establish two national memorials in commemoration of the events, one in each of the municipalities where the terrorist attacks took place.

Soon after the governmental decision on the matter, a memorial process was initiated in order to find suited locations and designs.

The process has been subject to much debate, which intensified after the announcement in February last year of Jonas Dahlberg’s proposal “Memory Wound” as the winning design for a memorial on the mainland facing Utøya. Protest groups and media critics are painting a picture of a process and a result lacking democratic support. At present the process has come to a standstill, the realization of the memorials has been postponed, and people previously in favor of the “Memory Wound”, no longer seem eager to defend it.

In my presentation I will take you through the different phases of this national memorial process up until today, and seek to identify possible explanations for the present standstill.

First phase: Framing of the process

The first phase of the process is defined by the work laid down by a committee or steering group, which was appointed by the government in December 2011. Their task was to consider possible designs and locations for the two national memorials. The group was led by Åse Kleveland, and included two members from the government, two members from the National support group for the July 22 events and one member of the Labour Youth League (AUF). The group worked in close cooperation with Public Art Norway (KORO), who appointed four art consultants to assist the group.

On April 25, 2012 the group presented their report, with the title “Places to remember and to be reminded”. Before the publication of this report the planned memorials were mostly referred to as “minnesmerker” – “memory marks” or monuments, both in the media and in official statements. The report, however, recommends a design and concept making the memorials into “memorial sites”. The report explains memorial sites as characterized by a more flexible design, a less authoritarian way of communicating, a wider set of functions and a broader mission than traditional monuments.
Memorial sites do not simply bear witness of a specific event, the report states. They also provide a space for people to reflect on the event and on its consequences. The question of location is given much attention in the report. In January 2012 the steering group and the art consultants had conducted site inspections on several potential locations. The report recommended two alternative locations for each memorial. For the memorial in Oslo the steering group proposed Nisseberget (a small hill in the park surrounding the Royal Palace in Oslo) as their first choice and the Government Quarter as their second choice. Nisseberget was recommended because of its open, accessible, and at the same time quiet character. The proposal was however heavily criticized from the very beginning. The main objection was that the site had nothing to do with July 22. The critics emphasized the importance of a strong connection between the events and the memorial site, and considered it one of the most important factors for succeeding in creating a meaningful memorial. Many pointed at the place in front of Oslo Cathedral, where people had created the largest spontaneous memorial, as a suited location. The place was considered by the steering group, but they rejected it because they wanted the memorial to be both religiously and politically neutral.

The Government Quarter, on the other hand, was considered a most interesting location, but it was difficult to make plans for because of the uncertainties related to accessibility and the long time frame set for the rebuilding process. A construction site was not considered the best place for a peaceful and dignified memorial.

For the Hole memorial, the steering group recommended the promontory Sørbråten, with a place called Lauvodden as a second choice. Both locations are situated on the mainland facing Utøya. The island itself was not considered an option, first and foremost because of problems of access. Among several other possible locations, the steering group also considered the place where the largest spontaneous memorial in the municipality had been established, but concluded that it did not fulfill the criteria set for the memorial.

The final decision on the locations was made by the Government. In summer 2012 the Government Quarter was announced to be the location for the memorial in Oslo. In order to solve the problem of accessibility during the rebuilding process, it was decided that a temporary memorial was to be established pending on the reconstruction of the area.

The question of the location in Hole was not resolved until April 2013, when it was finally announced that Sørbråten was to be the place. The main argument for choosing Sørbråten over Lauvodden was that the landscape on Sørbråten reminded of the landscape at Utøya. One of the locals opposed this decision, uttering concerns in the local newspaper about the negative impact the memorial might have on the nearby farm and cultural environment. The local newspaper invited to a debate in the internet version of the article, but only one comment was made. The writer of this
comment also found the site unsuitable, especially because it was what he called a “real pearl” in the nature of Hole and because he feared the infrastructural challenges that the memorial would cause. A few days later the news editor concluded that with a few exceptions, people seemed to agree that the right place had been chosen.

In addition to the recommendations concerning design and location, the report of the first steering group proposed the following frames for the process to come: that the commission be awarded on the basis of an open, international call for a pre-qualification stage, followed by a closed competition. The report also stressed the importance of including relatives and other affected parties in the process of creating the memorials. As goals set to guide the memorial process the report stated that the memorial sites “shall honor and commemorate the victims, survivors, first responders and volunteers”, they “shall be accessible to all”, they “shall be dignified and unifying”, they “shall communicate the goal of an open, warm and including society, with hopes for the future and protecting human rights”, they “shall be religiously and politically neutral”, they “shall be beautiful places for reflection and inspiration”, and the memorials in Hole and Oslo “shall be related both in form and in content”.

Second phase: Choosing a design

A second phase of the process started in July 2012, when Public Art Norway (KORO) was assigned the artistic and operational responsibility for carrying out the memorial project, based on the decisions following the steering group’s report. As is normal in projects of public art KORO appointed two art consultants, an architect and a representative for the state landowner, Statsbygg, to sit as members of an Art Selection Committee and jury. In addition, the Ministry of Culture demanded that the committee included representatives for the Labour Youth League (AUF) and the National Support Group, as well as one representative of the Norwegian Government.

The Art Selection Committee convened in Oslo on November 19, 2012. Their work first led to an art plan, published in June 2013, where they presented ambitions for the memorial site, an analysis of the sites and surrounding landscapes, an explanation of the overall artistic concept, as well as an execution plan, budget and progress schedule.

Like the steering group, the Art Selection Committee emphasized the importance of an open and including process, and stated «(...) that the process of establishing the memorials should be transparent and include public participation as far as this is possible.» The first effort to reach out to and involve the public was made in April 2013. On April 25 the website “minnesteder.no” was presented, and the audience was encouraged to contribute to a survey asking which words and associations the respondents wanted the memorials to incorporate. The audience was given 14 days to respond. The result was visualized in a word cloud which was incorporated into the art plan. The
Art Selection Committee described this survey as “the most important strategy in the process of involving a national audience”.19

The Art Plan was made public on June 11, 2013. One week later Public Art Norway issued an open international call for entries. By September 1 this prequalification stage was over, and the Art Selection Committee had received letters from 300 applicants. On October 10 eight of these were invited to a closed competition. Each group was asked to propose a concept and design for two memorials in the Government Center- one temporary and one permanent - and one memorial for Sørbråten in Hole. The biggest challenge at this point was the Oslo memorials, since they had to be conceived in an unresolved setting: Nothing was yet decided regarding the future of the damaged government buildings, and the area surrounding them.

On February 22, 2014 the eight groups’ proposals were presented in an exhibition in the City Hall Gallery in Oslo. For five days the public could study the proposals while the jury worked on their decision.

Prior to the announcement of the winner, a few attempts were made to involve affected parties and the public: the day before the exhibition opening, families of the victims and members of the Labour Youth League were invited for a private preview. Here, they were asked if they regarded any of the proposals unbearable or problematic. At this point the jury had already singled out their favorite, Dahlberg’s “Memory Wound”, but they were ready to change their mind if the families and survivors argued against it. This however, did not happen. Another outreach consisted of a guest book at the doorway of the exhibition, where people could leave their comments on the proposals. However, the Art Selection Committee did not want an exhibition which generated «high temperature». According to one of the art consultants the main ambition was to arrange for a peaceful and dignified exhibition setting. The Committee evaluated the possibility for a public poll, but they chose not to arrange that, feeling that it would be inappropriate to vote for audience favorites.20 There were also plans for a meeting, open to the general public, where researchers, politicians and other debaters would discuss the eight proposals and their expectations for the memorials, but, according to the leader of the Art Selection Committee, this had to be cancelled, because people were reluctant to participate, and did not want to have a leading voice in the discussion.21

On February 27, Jonas Dahlberg was announced winner of the competition. The now well-known proposal for the Sørbråten memorial shows a cut through the headland from the top and to below the water. A pathway leads from the mainland onto the headland and into an underground passage leading to a gallery inside the cut. On the opposite side of the cut the names of the victims are inscribed, at a 3,5 m distance from the gallery, so that visitors can see them, but not reach them. The winning design also consisted of two both physically and conceptually related memorials
proposed for the Government Quarter. Here, the artist proposed to use stone and trees cut out at Sørbråten - first – in a temporary landscape with a channel-like memorial walk, and - later – in a permanent site with the form of an open-air amphitheater in front of the government high-rise building. In connection with the permanent memorial he also suggested an underground information center. In their assessment, the jury praised the proposal for being radical and brave, and for evoking the tragedy in a physical and direct manner. They emphasized the way the proposal distinguished itself by being a physical work of art, rather than a place, a situation or an action. They also stated: “In his proposal for Sørbråten, Dahlberg displays a forceful orchestration of the visitors’ experience and understanding of the memorial site, but herein lies much of the appeal of the project: one cannot avoid being affected by it.”

A heated debate and the present standstill

The reactions immediately after the announcement of the winner were unanimously positive. This changed after a couple of weeks. The critique focused mainly on the proposal for Sørbråten, and addressed the choice of artistic design as well as the location and the management of the process. The critique was voiced primarily by a group of neighbors to Sørbråten, some of them people who had risked their lives rescuing camp participants from Utøya during the attack. The group also got support from some family members of Utøya victims.

The protests were a bit confused, going in different directions. Some were easily disregarded because they were grounded on misinformation or misunderstandings, as for example the objection from some of the affected families who believed they would not have a say concerning the use of victims’ names on the memorial, and the objection from a couple of geologists that the ground at Sørbråten would collapse as soon as one started to cut through it. Protests from a wider public also show that many people believed – and many still believe – that the memorial cuts through Utøya and not a small headland on the landside.

The main objection, which cannot be disregarded, however, concerns the negative impact the process has on the people of Hole in general and the residents near Sørbråten in particular. These represent an affected party, who has not been invited to have a say until very much both concerning location and design was already decided. Originally, the group agitating against the memorial was very small, but they argued forcefully and got a lot of media coverage, which has given the impression of massive resistance in Hole. The debate has created a tense situation in the municipality. Some of the locals wish the memorial welcome, while others now prepare to take the case to court.
The present standstill is, in my view, the result of weaknesses in the management of the memorial process, combined with a daring choice of design, which challenges most people’s expectations about what a national memorial might look like.

Jonas Dahlberg’s Memory Wound for Sørbråten is a strong design, which I believe provides room for reflection as well as for sorrow and remembrance, and which communicates a sensitivity alongside the brutality of the loss. In the debate, these qualities are completely overshadowed by the negative connotations of ‘the cut’ and ‘the wound’. So is the overall concept which the proposal is part of. The balancing of the brutal poetics of the Sørbråten memorial with the more future oriented, communal space in the proposal for the Government Quarter is appealing, but irrelevant to a community which, according to the first report of the steering group, “does not want to reinforce and extend a local identity connected to the atrocities at Utøya”.23

I believe that one major reason for the present standstill is that the intentions pronounced early in the process, of inclusion and participation, have not been carried out in a thoughtful enough manner. Although more open and inviting than most processes of public art, the national memorial process after July 22, has allowed for little actual participation and informed discussion prior to decisions. In hindsight, the neighbors, among them both rescuers and landslide witnesses of the atrocities, should have been recognized by the project managers as an affected party, with a right to be heard. The fact that they were, for a long time, largely ignored, makes the case of a relatively small group of protesters amongst these neighbors stronger than it would have been, had they had a formal opportunity to have a say before decisions were made.

Contributing to the standstill is also the fact that the context surrounding the national memorials has changed radically since the beginning of the process. We are at a different stage of mourning and of working through of the events. At the beginning of the process there were no other permanent places of the kind. Now, a whole new layer has been added to the memorial landscape of Norway, with references to the July 22 attacks. The newly established 22 July Centre in Oslo and the Labour Youth’s memorial on Utøya have been embraced both by those directly affected and by the public at large, and have to some extent answered the need for more permanent places of memory. The national memorial process might suffer under this. Who are still willing to defend the Memory Wound, as the protesters’ will to continue their fight is growing stronger?


Ibid.


Ibid.
