

Morten Bing

A Time Machine made of Bricks

Wessels gate 15
at Norsk Folkenmuseum

There is a path from
the past to the future



In 1998 OBOS – Oslo Cooperative Housing Cooperation – offered Norsk Folkemuseum Wessels gate 15, an old three-storey brick building from down town Oslo.

Wessels gate 15 was built in 1865, and was very typical for the residential quarters in the older parts of Oslo. Wessels gate is situated between the West End and the East End of Oslo and used to be an area occupied by the middle class, or rather petit bourgeoisie, mostly shopkeepers, craftsmen and employees, with some upper middle class and some working class elements mixed in.

The museum accepted the offer, and when the building was demolished in March 1999, five containers of building parts were transported to the museum. The reerection of the building began in 2000 and was finished in 2001. The same year the first flat – or home – in the building was furnished.

When the project is finally finished in 2009, the building will contain eight homes in addition to a wine monopoly store and three exhibitions. At the present six of these homes are completed, a seventh will be ready at the end of May.

The purpose of the reerection of Wessels gate 15 at Norsk Folkemuseum is not primarily the preservation of an old building, but the opportunity to tell stories of daily life, living conditions and interior styles in Oslo from the late 19th century up to the present.

The purpose of the project is ...

- to offer an insight in why we live as we live and why we do as we do.
- to show that the way we think, the way we interpret the world around us, the way we arrange our lives and our homes are a product of the past.
- to emphasize the connection between the past, the present – and the future.

In my opinion the Open Air Museum is an exhibition, in principle not different from other exhibitions. The interiors are not simply constructed or reconstructed homes, but narratives with a defined purpose and a specific perspective. Each home in Wessels gate 15 tells a different story from different times, presenting people of contrasting social and cultural backgrounds.

One essential point: In several of the flats in Wessels gate 15 we have chosen to invent a family and construct their home, in stead of reconstructing the home of the actual residents in that house at the time. There are several reasons for this:

- Even though we know who have lived in the different flats in Wessels gate 15 during that period, our knowledge of the details of their lives and their homes are limited.
- But more important. Our primary aim is not to tell the story of one residential building, but to give a general picture of living condition. Consequently our narratives are chosen to serve this aim, independent of the specific history of Wessels gate 15



I will now present the furnished interiors in Wessels gate 15 and account for the concept of each home:

“1879 – The Doll’s House” is based on Henrik Ibsen’s play, published that year. Ibsen described Nora and Torvald Helmer’s home as “furnished comfortably and tastefully, but not extravagantly”. But even though the narrative is Ibsen’s play, we have a different purpose in displaying this home. We will present the late 19th century bourgeois home as a female sphere in a male world, with the front stage where the master and the mistress entertained guests and the back stage where the servants worked and the children usually were hidden away. We also want to show that the privacy and intimacy of the bourgeois home is an important part of the development of a modern home culture



- This is the feminine parlour more or less as described by Ibsen
- The piano is a key object in a well-furnished home
- The servants work, while the masters dine

“1905 – A Norwegian Home in a New Age” is furnished to show the new home ideals introduced by the Swedish author *Ellen Key* in her book *Skönhet for alla* (Beauty for all) published in 1899 and translated to Norwegian in 1903 with the title *Gjer heimen din fager* (Beautify your Home). These home ideals incorporated a rhetoric pointing forward to the functionalism of the 20s and 30s, and an interior style combining elements of art nouveau with traditional crafts and dragon style. Key expressions are “light and airy”, functional, simple and plain, but also beautiful.



The narrative is fictional. We have invented a young teacher’s family – a married couple with a small child and a maid. They are part of a counter-culture incorporating non-socialist radicalism, beliefs in national independence, “Landsmål” – the New Norwegian language – and interest in folk costumes, folk dance and folk songs.

- The furniture in the dining room is jugend/art nouveau
- The drawing room has furniture and a lamp in dragon style and a traditional woven tapestry on the wall
- The plain white furniture in the bed room points forward to the functional style of the 20s.

“1950 – The Cleaning Lady’s Home” is the reconstruction of an authentic home from the mid 20th Century, the home of the cleaning lady Gunda Eriksen, born 1887. Mrs. Eriksen didn’t actually live in Wessels gate 15, but in another part of town. But her home was just the same size as the flat in Wessels gate. All Gunda Eriksen’s belongings were collected to the museum in 1957, and her home was thoroughly photographed.



Gunda’s home had two rooms and a kitchen. One of the rooms was a living room in the day and a bed room at night. It was furnished with a divan, a table, a rocking chair and a chest of drawers. The other room was the dining room, only used for special occasions. These two traits, the rearranging of the room between day and night, and the seldom used best room, were both typical for the mid-century working class way of life.

- This is Gunda's combined living room and bedroom with plain and cheap furniture. Her divan is simply a bed of iron with a mattress and embroidered pillows. On the table the Bible she was given at Sunday school.
- The dining room furniture made of oak in late neo-renaissance was bought second-hand at Gunda's wedding in 1924.

“1965 – TV, Teak and Teenagers” is also a fiction. We have made up an engineer's family with a teenage son and an eight year old daughter. They have been living in the flat in Wessels gate 15 for ten years, and have just redecorated their home and bought new furniture and a TV-set.

The 1960s is a time of change:

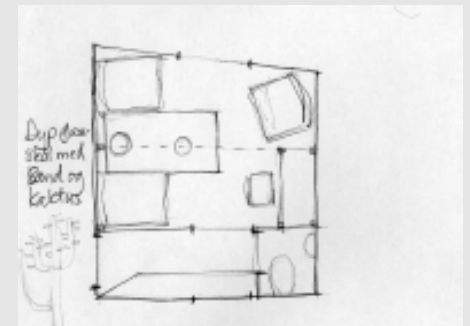
- New prosperity changes the *interior*
- The TV changes *social life*
- The new teenager culture changes the *family*

In this flat we want to show how these changes in society in the mid 1960s is mirrored in the home. On the TV-screen we'll show the news-broadcast from the day the labour prime-minister Einar Gerhardsen handed over his office to his non-socialist successor, after 20 years of social-democratic rule. But the TV has to compete with the roaring sound of the Rolling Stones from the record player in the teenager's room.

“1979 – The Architect's Home” differs from the flats already mention in an important way: This is an authentic home from Wessels gate 15 as presented in the interior magazine *Bonytt* in 1979! The architects Tove Kvalstad and Ola Ulset represent a new stratum of people who moved in to Wessels gate 15 in the 70s: Architects, musicians, academics. They are exponents of a new, modern life style and are not tied up in traditional ways of arranging their home and their daily life. The interior are a detailed reconstruction of Tove's and Ola's home made in cooperation with the couple.

- In the main rooms in the flat the furniture is very modern for the late 70s. The colours are mostly black and white. But there is also a few heirlooms like the old bureau cabinet.
- Tove and Ola had work places with Drafting tables. To the left photographed in their original home in 1979. To the right at the museum 25 years later.
- The kitchen had spruce floor and colours typical for the 70's. To the left, at the museum, to the right, with Tove and Ola, back in 1979.

“1982 – The Student's Bedsitter” is also an authentic home from Wessels gate 15. In 1982 it was rented by Alvhill, Ola Ulset's younger sister. The small 10 m² bedsitter contains a room with a loft bed, a desk and a couple of chairs, an entrance with a refrigerator and an electric plate, and a toilet with a cold water sink. The interior shows how small and simple a students living quarters could still be in the 80s. The reconstruction of the bedsitter is mainly based on Alvhill's memory. This was also an interesting experiment as her memory grew triggered by the progress of the project.



“2002 – A Pakistani Home in Norway” is furnished in cooperation with a Pakistani family living in the eastern part of Oslo. It is similar, but not identical to the home of the Pakistani family. It shows a home and an interior style both exotic and familiar.

- Curtains and other textiles are important. Some of them brought home from Pakistan. The furniture is mostly bought second hand. Exotic elements are the fan in the ceiling, the waterfall picture and the mosque alarm-clock on the shelf.
- The rather expensive bed is the dream of every Pakistani woman – according to the mother in our informant-family.

The Home is a Mirror of Society. It is a microcosmos which mirrors the macrocosmos, by studying the home we are able to interpret and understand structures and cultural changes in society, and by exhibiting different homes from different times and social and cultural groups we can show differences and similarities in the society of yesterday and today.

But finally: Homes at a museum are not the past, they are not remains of the past or reconstructions of the past – they are tales of the past.

This presentasjon was given at the Open Air Conference at Skansen in 2007. The last apartment in Wessels gate 15 was not yet finished and is missing in the presentation.

