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ARTICLE

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Cultural policy and the politics of display. The establishment of the opera house in Oslo

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ABSTRACT

How can we understand governments' willingness to make large investments in iconic cultural buildings? What does this trend tell us about governments' cultural policy interests and priorities? In this article we illuminate these questions based on a study of the framing of the political decision-making processes associated with the establishment of the Opera House in Oslo, Norway. Theoretically, we draw on Hans Abbing's reflections on the 'politics of display'. As developed in this article, the concept of politics of display draw attention to the representative role accorded to art and culture in cultural policy and the role of cultural policy in the legitimation of government power. The political debate on the Opera House, we show, was framed from the outset as a matter of politics of display, as politicians highlighted the goal of creating identification with national institutions among Norwegians and a desire to increase Norway's international prestige. One conclusion we draw from the study is that the trend for investments in iconic cultural buildings should make researchers attentive to the politics of display as an important driving force in cultural policy. Another conclusion is a call for researchers to be attentive to the national dimension of cultural policy.

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Introduction

> (I)n the course of the twentieth century the architect (. . .) of great public buildings, has become the ruler of the world of the fine arts. He (. . .) finds the most suitable, that is, the most costly and impressive, expression for the megalomania of wealth and power, and also that of nationalisms. (Hobsbawm 2013, 13)

In 2008, Norway celebrated the opening of the new Opera House in the capital city of Oslo. Due to its spectacular design, size and location, the Opera House immediately became an object of national and international attention and marked the start of a reshaping of the city's waterfront area, by way of iconic cultural buildings. Since then, the national government, the city government and private actors have executed several other iconic cultural building projects in Oslo. These buildings are part of a familiar global trend for investment in iconic buildings by private corporations and government organisations (Bern 2022; Sklair 2006). From the 1970s onwards, investments in iconic architecture have played an increasingly important role in cultural policy, as illustrated by the Sydney Opera House, the Paris Bastille Opera, and the Bilbao Guggenheim Museum. Apart from their spectacular design and size, such cultural buildings are generally characterised by their high financial cost. The

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relative costs of some of these building projects are staggering, considering that they are financed from budgets reserved for cultural policy, a tiny and cash-strapped domain of public policy.

At the time of its planning and opening, the Opera House in Oslo was frequently described by politicians as the biggest cultural policy undertaking of the Norwegian national government. This referred not only to the investment costs of the building, which amounted to 360 million Euro, but also to the state's long-term obligation to finance the cultural institution. In the aftermath of the opening of the Opera House, the Norwegian government committed to investment on an even larger scale, with the project to establish a new building for the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, which was achieved in 2020 at a cost of 543 million Euro. In 2022, the running costs of the two institutions accounted for 13 per cent of the Ministry of Culture's total expenditure on culture[1] and roughly the same amount of money as the state channelled to cultural life through Art Council Norway and Government Grant for Artists (Prop. 1S (2022–2023)).

How can we understand national governments' willingness to prioritise such large financial investments in iconic cultural buildings as part of cultural policy? What does this trend tell us about governments' cultural policy interests and priorities? In this article we seek to illuminate these questions through a study of the political decision-making processes associated with the establishment of the Opera House in Oslo.

The most straightforward answer to these questions is that iconic cultural buildings contribute to long-established national cultural policy goals of facilitating the creation and mediation of art and culture, and of making art and culture accessible to all. As we will show, the Norwegian government justified the Opera House project with explicit reference to these policy goals and there are few reasons to doubt the sincerity of these intentions. However, given that most cultural policy initiatives are justified with reference to the same policy goals, and given that cultural policy is a domain in which actors normally fight over fractions of the resources spent on the Opera House, this alone cannot explain the extensive resources made available for this particular project.

Another conventional answer to the question of why governments choose to invest in iconic cultural buildings is to view this as part of the global trend to use iconic architecture in neoliberal or entrepreneurial urban planning and governance (Harvey 1989; Patterson 2012). More specifically, the Opera House project can be seen to be in line with the trend for such investments to be intended to catalyse urban or regional economic growth, often referred to as the 'Bilbao effect' (Plaza 2006; Shoval and Strom 2009). Such theories on the social and economic impacts of investments in culture have received much criticism from academic researchers (Belfiore 2003). On similar grounds, many of the political actors that pushed for the establishment of the Opera House, rejected the belief that it could function as an engine of urban development. Again, this suggests that this motive alone cannot explain the considerable resources spent on this project.

This should encourage researchers to explore additional explanations for governments' willingness to invest extensive resources in iconic cultural buildings as a part of cultural policy, and this is what we aim to do in this article. In part, we take our cue from a planning research study (Smith and Krogh Strand 2011), which observes that developing national identity was one of several justifications for the Opera House project among experts involved in the project, without placing this in a cultural policy context. We also take our cue from Hans Abbing's (2002) reflections on the 'politics of display' as an explanation for why the modern state chooses to finance art, which highlight the continuity between the art patronage of ancient regimes and contemporary cultural policy. As developed in this article, the concept of politics of display underscores the representative role accorded to art and culture in cultural policy, and the role of cultural policy in the legitimation of political power.

The Norwegian government's decision to establish the Opera House, we will show, was framed very clearly as a matter of politics of display. More specifically, we will show that the political process that led to the establishment of the Opera House was framed as the continuation of a nation-building project that has been at the heart of Norway's cultural policy since the early nineteenth century, the ambition to bring the country's cultural life up to the level of other European countries.

In contemporary cultural policy debates, this project is referred to as a matter of Norway's development as a 'cultural nation' ('*kulturnasjon*'). We conclude the article with a call to researchers to be attentive to the continued importance of the politics of display and of the national dimension in the generation of cultural policy in contemporary liberal democracies.

Document study and methodology

The empirical material we consider consists of all documents in the Norwegian parliament (Stortinget) that laid the foundation for the parliament's decision to establish the Opera House. We follow the entire process in parliament from the first proposal to the final decision. Altogether, these documents form a text corpus, i.e. a collection of texts that serve a specific purpose and that comply with rules for content and format. There may be important arguments not included in this text corpus. Still, we can assume that it contains significant arguments for that democratically elected representatives decided to establish the Opera House. The government's and the political parties' positions in parliament are expressed in these documents, and they produced documents with different functions in parliament.

On behalf of the government, the Norwegian Ministry of Culture and Equality produced government white papers presented to parliament (termed St. Meld. or Meld. St.) and proposals presented by the government to parliament (known as Prop. S. or Ot. Prp.). Within the parliament, the committees produced recommendations in the form of (Innst. S). Based on debates and voting in parliament, we include minutes in the form of (Reports and voting in parliament). These show how the positions of the various political parties are expressed in parliament, which is important for elucidating consensus and disagreements. All quotes are our own translations from Norwegian to English.

With the aim of looking beyond the Opera House project, we also include public speeches by politicians about the Opera House. In addition, we consider documents related to the parliament's decision to establish the new National Museum building, which can be viewed as an extension of the process related to the Opera House.

On considering these documents, we sought to understand how the Opera House project was conceived more broadly by politicians, and the hopes and aspirations they invested in this project. More precisely, we sought to identify how this was 'framed' by decision makers in government and parliament. The concept of framing (Bateson [1972] 2000; Goffman 1974) points to the interpretative schemes people employ to make sense of social reality and which motivate them for various courses of action. In line with this methodology, we sought to identify concepts, visions and narratives that were evoked by decision makers in the debate on the Opera House project, and to contextualise these in light of Norwegian political history.

The politics of display

Hans Abbing's point of departure when he speaks of 'politics of display' in *Why are Artists Poor?* (2002) is the continuity between the art patronage of *ancient regimes* and cultural policy in contemporary liberal democracies.[2] Our use of the concept of politics of display is premised on several aspects of Abbing's discussion: *first*, he draws attention to how art has served government interests, not only in historical times, but also in contemporary cultural policy. The conventional view of government's role in the cultural policies of contemporary liberal democracies is as a disinterested actor, which is guided by various collective good objectives, such as the goals of making art accessible to all, and to stimulate a vibrant public sphere, economic regeneration or public health. Such collective goods justifications are necessary for cultural policy to be sanctioned by national parliaments, but they do not provide us with sufficient explanation of governments' willingness to divert substantial resources to art and culture, Abbing contends. To understand this, we must look beyond the official goals of cultural policy. A more plausible

explanation, he argues, is that art and culture may serve interests of legitimation and solidification of government power.

This directs us to a *second* aspect of the concept of politics of display, which is that it underlines the *representative* role of art and culture, i.e. the role of art and culture as a manifestation of political power and as a naturalising legitimation of political power (cf. Habermas 1991; Habermas, Lennox, and Lennox 1974; Østerberg 1997). In feudal society, the church, princes and nobility engaged in conspicuous consumption of art, Abbing notes. Here, the display of power through art took the form of propaganda or blatant glorification of political authority. In contemporary liberal democracies, Abbing argues, the politics of display reflect the role acquired by art in the course of the nineteenth century, as an autonomous sphere of society and as a sphere of society imbued with a sense of sacredness. Therefore, contemporary governments act more as donors than as consumers of art, and the display of power through art is no longer intended to convey direct messages about the might and right of political authorities. Rather, the display takes more subtle forms, where art's 'halo of sacredness shines upon' government donors and 'merely suggests actual power' (Abbing 2002, 189). For contemporary democratic governments that are intent on not interfering with the autonomy of art, investment in iconic cultural buildings can be a particularly suitable vehicle for the display of power. Now as before, the returns governments receive from their donations to art are 'attention, respect and distinction' (Abbing 2002, 188).

A *third* aspect of the concept of politics of display concerns the addressees of these symbols of government power. As for the art consumption of political authorities in feudal times, the politics of display in which contemporary governments engage has a dual purpose, as Abbing points out. It is intended to promote common feelings of identity and social cohesion *internally* among the subjects of governments, and simultaneously to enhance governments' prestige *externally*, as a display of a city's, a region's or a country's creative and cultural capabilities to the outside world.

Nation-building and cultural policy in Norway

Thus conceived, the politics of display can be a dimension of cultural policy at all levels of government. However, the focus of Abbing's discussion is on the uses of art and culture for display purposes by governments, which we develop further in this article by linking it to nation-building processes. By implication, the political processes with we are concerned coincide with what Löfgren (1989) terms the 'cultural politics of nation-building'. Löfgren highlights the dual orientation of processes of nation-building and notes that this is a task that 'calls for internal and external communication' (1989, 12). The 'young' nation-states that emerged in Europe during the nineteenth century were confronted with a well-established 'inventory list' of what a proper nation should brandish, such as a national flag, anthem and folk culture (Anderson [1983] 2006; Aronsson and Elgenius 2015; Löfgren 1989). Included in this model of the nation was the expectation that it should bring forth an artistic high culture and cultural institutions, e.g. in the form of national museums (Aronsson and Elgenius 2015) or opera houses (Hobsbawm 2013; Østerberg 1997).

Having been a province under Danish political rule and subject to Copenhagen's cultural domination for centuries, Norway established independent state institutions in 1814, as the country was transferred into a political union with Sweden. This opened an opportunity for nation-building campaigns in Norway, which culminated with formal independence in 1905.

When it comes to a national high culture, the young Norwegian nation was starting from scratch, as it was almost bereft of modern cultural institutions and lacked a social class that could sustain cultural life through patronage. Accordingly, in their history of Norwegian cultural policy, Dahl and Helseth (2006) highlight that the government has been guided by an awareness that Norway 'lags behind' in the development of national art and cultural institutions. A recurring motif in Norwegian cultural policy from 1814 onwards, they show, was:

> (T)he need to promote national honour towards the outside world, or vice versa: to avert the shame that would be if we did not have the art, the institutions, and the level of culture that foreign countries would expect from a nation like the Norwegian. (Dahl and Helseth 2006, 13)

For these reasons, they argue, imitation of other countries with the aim of enhancing national prestige has been an important mechanism shaping Norwegian cultural policy. The continued relevance of these observations is indicated by Henningsen and Røyseng (2023), who note that expressions of shame about the insufficiencies of Norway's cultural life are commonly voiced by actors in cultural policy debates today, pointing to the relative absence of an historic high culture in Norway and the low legitimacy of cultural elites compared to those of other European countries (Haarr and Krogstad 2011; Skarpenes 2007).

While Dahl and Helseth (2006) posit that striving for national prestige has been an overarching goal of Norwegian cultural policy at all times, they have little to say about this issue (or about nation-building more generally) in their account of cultural policy from the mid-twentieth century until the present, the period when cultural policy in the sense of a formally designated administrative domain emerged, in conjunction with the development of the welfare state. In this respect they are in conformity with the dominant strand of cultural policy research in Norway, which has had little to say about nationality in relation to cultural policy (cf. Mangset and Hylland 2017) or that touches on this as a feature of secondary importance (cf. Bakke 2005).[3] One reason for this might be that researchers are so accustomed to the notion of cultural policy as a form of welfare policy, or as a means of generating socio-economic 'impact', that motives of nation-building and international prestige are not noticed. Thereby, we will show, researchers may have overlooked an important dimension of contemporary cultural policy.

In the sections that follow, we turn to consider the political process associated with the establishment of the Opera House. First, we account for how the Opera House project was framed by politicians in parliament in terms of various location alternatives and which national symbols each of them represented. Then, we move on to elucidate how the project was framed as politics of display in general and with a special focus on becoming a cultural nation. Finally, we discuss cultural policy initiatives that followed in the aftermath of the opening of the Opera House.

Framings of the opera house project

The argument that Norway should have an opera arose in the 1920s, and the discussion continued until 1959, when the opera was established in the *Folketeater* ('The people's theatre') building in Oslo (Christensen 2015; Røyseng 2000). The country thereby gained an opera company (the Norwegian Opera & Ballet), but not an opera house. It took several decades for the political process that led to the establishment of the new Opera House to gain momentum. This was occasioned by the closure of the city's Western Railway Station in 1988, which was seen as a possible site for a new opera (Christensen 2015; Røyseng 2000; Whist, Kalhagen, and Henningsen 2017). From this time onward, there was broad agreement among the political parties that there was a need for a new opera house. The exception was the right-wing Progress Party, which opposed the project throughout the political process, arguing that the taxpayers' money should not be spent on a cultural offering for a wealthy elite in the capital. Among the majority that supported the project there were disagreements about the location of the Opera House and this hampered the decision to go ahead with the project. Several location alternatives were at play and each of these represented different national symbols.

One alternative, which could signal an anchoring of the project in classic values of social democracy, was to upgrade the opera's facilities in the *Folketeater* building. Since its opening in 1934, *Folketeateret* has been central to the activities of the labour movement and the idea of making art and culture accessible to the working class (Helle 1994). However, this alternative was never discussed as a real option, as it was seen to have several practical weaknesses compared to a new building, and, it was believed that a renovation will have a lower symbolic value than building a new

building (St.prp.no. 48 (1998–1999), 13). Another alternative was the vacant site of the old Western Railway Station, which is located in a prosperous part of the city, with several political and cultural institutions nearby, such as the town hall, the national theatre and the royal castle. Those who supported this alternative argued that the opera could thereby be integrated into an established cultural district and that: '(p)lacing the new building in the heart of the capital also highlights the institution's national character' (St.prp. nr.37 (1997–98), 5). A third alternative was to locate the opera house in Bjørvika, a bay in the eastern and least prosperous part of the city's waterfront area. Bjørvika represented an alternative that could display the city's first settlements and cultural monuments. At the time, however, Bjørvika had the character of a derelict harbour area and was burdened with heavy traffic and therefore represented an 'empty' site and a vision for future urban development and mitigation of social inequalities between western and eastern parts of the city (Røyseng 2000).

In 1998, the government consisting of the Christian People's Party, the Centre Party and the Liberal Party presented parliament with a proposal for the building of a new opera house at the Western Railway Station (St.prp.nr. 37 (1997–98)). The proposal was opposed by the Labour Party and the Socialist Left Party, who argued for locating the opera house in Bjørvika (Innst. S. nr. 225 (1997–98)). Although a large majority agreed that the country should have a new opera house, none of the location alternatives received a majority vote (Report and voting in parliament 1998). The following year, a new parliamentary proposal was presented (St.prp.No 48 (1998–99)), which again favoured the Western Railway Station, but made an opening for a location in Bjørvika. As matters fell, the parliamentary majority decided that: 'A new opera house will be built in Bjørvika' (Innst. S.nr. 213 (1998–1999), 31).

After this decision was made, the political process entered a new phase, where the majority of the political parties rallied in their support for the project, as was affirmed in the parliamentary debates that followed (cf. Innst. S. nr. 234, (2001–2002); Report and voting in parliament 2002; St.prp.nr. 48 (2001–2002)). In 2001, it was decided by parliament that the Norwegian architectural firm Snøhetta would design the building (Innst. S. nr. 234 (2001–2002)). The year after, parliament decided on a financial plan for the construction of the Opera House.

As indicated by this brief account, in the political process that led to the establishment of the Opera House politicians in government and parliament brought a variety of framings to bear on the issue. On the one hand, the Progress Party voiced a populist criticism of the Opera House project, which was framed as an *elite project* and pitted against ordinary people's need for healthcare, education and roads, evoking historical tensions of class and centre-periphery relations in the Norwegian political culture (Rokkan 1966, 1987; Sørensen 2001). On the other hand, the political parties that supported the Opera House project inserted the project into several different frames of understanding.

Most notably, this was framed as a *project of widening the population's access to opera and ballet*. Throughout the political process, the majority agreed that the cultural policy objective of the project was: 'to disseminate opera and ballet of high quality to a wide audience, and to reach new audience groups' (St.prp.nr.37 (1997–98), 1), and this was underlined by a decision that the government should develop a national plan for dissemination of opera and ballet. Another framing that was placed on the Opera House was as a project of *urban development*, which would serve as an engine of transformation of the Bjørvika area. This framing was voiced in particular by the Labour Party and Socialist Left Party, while the government and majority in parliament called the assumptions regarding the socio-economic impacts of the Opera House project on which it rested into question (Innst.S.no. 225 (1997–1998)).

Clearly, the goals of a broader access to opera and ballet and of urban development were important motives for the establishment of the Opera House, and in parliamentary debates politicians elaborated on these at length. However, as pointed out at the start of this article, these motives do not by themselves provide us with a satisfactory explanation for the decision to establish the Opera House. From our account of the political process, it should be clear as well that politicians' framing of the project went beyond this register of motives, as they highlighted the symbolic role of the Opera House and its national significance. This directs us to another important framing of the Opera House project as a vehicle of the *politics of display*. In the sections that follow, we look more closely at how this was articulated in political debates.

The opera house as politics of display

As we have indicated, politicians in the government and parliament envisaged the Opera House not only as an arena for the production and dissemination of art, but were also explicit about the representative role and functions it would serve and, hence, about its role as a vehicle of what Abbing (2002) refers to as the politics of display. This was indicated by frequent direct or indirect reference to the Opera House as a 'symbol', such as when politicians pointed out that: '(t)he new opera house will stand out as an important symbol of what modern Norway represents as a nation, and the importance culture should have in society' (St.prp.nr.48 (2001–2002), 5) or that 'the opera should have a location that provides the right associations with our cultural life and the quality we stand for as a nation' (Innst. S. no. 225 (1997–1998), 15). The framing of the issue as a matter of politics of display was also indicated by frequent reference to the Opera House as a 'monumental building', 'signal building', 'magnificent building', 'landmark' or 'flagship'.

In these and other ways, politicians in the government and parliament indicated that the representative function of the Opera House was a concern that carried its own weight. This was made clear from the outset of the political process, in the assessment of the Bjørvika location alternative in the government's first proposal to parliament regarding the Opera House project. The proposal pointed to the potential for the construction of a monumental building as a positive element of the Bjørvika alternative, but expressed strong doubts that an opera would function as a 'locomotive' of urban development in this area (St.prp.nr. 37 (1997–98), 5). Thus, while highlighting monumentality as a desired quality of the Opera House, the government dissociated this from anticipated effects of urban development. When the proposal was discussed in parliament, the majority sided with the government's disbelief in the Opera House as a 'locomotive' or 'engine' of urban development in Bjørvika. It sided also with its positive appraisal of monumentality in this connection and declared the 'monumental function' of the building as one of the objectives of the Opera House project (Innst. S. no. 225 (1997–1998), 19).

When the proposal was discussed in parliament, a majority consisting of all political parties except the Progress Party stated that the Opera House should be an 'important monumental building for the nation' and noted that this did not conflict with the project's aim of creating a 'powerhouse for the dissemination of opera, ballet and other forms of creative art' (Innst.S.no.225 (1997–1998), 19). The following year, the majority in parliament affirmed the monumentality objective that had been attached to the Opera House, which was now referred to as an 'architectural goal', and noted that, as a monumental building, it should draw attention to the significance of opera as an artform in the cultural life of the nation as well as to 'Norway as a cultural nation' (Innst.S.no.213 (1998–1999), 24). Thereby, it was affirmed that the Opera House was seen to serve two distinct (although complementary) functions: it was to be an arena for the dissemination of opera, ballet and other forms of art and, at the same time, an investment in the politics of display.

In the last phase of the political process, when the controversy about the location of the Opera House had been brought to a conclusion and the decision to go ahead with the building project had been made, the framing of the issue as a matter of politics of display was accentuated. In the parliamentary debate in 2002, members of parliament from across the party spectrum (except the Progress Party) thus spoke about their hopes and aspirations for the Opera House as a monumental building, often with reference to internationally well-known iconic cultural buildings. Here, a representative from the Socialist Left Party declared that:

> People know the opera house in Sydney, they remember Guggenheim in Bilbao, and many have seen the new black diamond in Copenhagen. They realise, therefore, that the value of such a new and different magnificent building [i.e. the opera house in Oslo] will not only be nationwide, but will have far reaching effects – far into Norwegian regions and small municipalities, far into the great world and far ahead in time. (Report and voting in Parliament 2002, 3182)

He added that the Opera House would be a source of 'joy, identity and community, not only locally and nationally, but also globally'. To take another example, a representative from the Labour Party

stated his hope that the Opera House would be a 'flagship that Norway needs, as a renowned cultural nation' (Report and voting in Parliament 2002, 3184). Like several other speakers, a representative from the Centre Party expressed her satisfaction with a recent poll which indicated that 'people want a magnificent building that will bring joy to the Norwegian people in the present and the future' (Report and voting in Parliament 2002, 3183), while a representative from the Liberal Party noted that:

> It is expensive to build a monumental international building like an opera. But if we succeed, I am convinced that the value we get in return will be far greater than what we contribute financially, and that it will be an opera that people can be proud of all over the country. (Report and voting in Parliament 2002, 3183)

Apart from the elevated tone (which was commented on by several representatives), these quotations are generally illustrative of the perspectives politicians viewed the Opera House project in throughout the political process. When politicians declared their hopes and aspirations for the Opera House as a monumental building, and as a source of attention, respect and distinction, they would typically alternate between a national and an international perspective. To put the matter in Abbing's (2002) terms, they envisaged the Opera House as a vehicle of internal, as well as external display.

As we have indicated, the political debate was rife with references to the Opera House as a symbol that would be of value to the entire country, and hence its role as a vehicle of *internal display*. Contrary to the Progress Party's arguments that the project would solely be to the benefit of an urban elite, the majority in parliament presented the Opera House as a project that would bridge historical conflicts of class and geography in Norwegian social and political life. As envisaged by the parliamentary majority, the Opera House was not just a means of providing the population access to art, but also a symbolic means of forging social cohesion, as a source of shared pride, joy and identity throughout the entire country. The Opera House was also highlighted as a vehicle of *external display*. From the outset of the Opera House debate, politicians made it clear that this would be a monumental building that would capture the attention and admiration of the world outside Norway. This was often described as a matter of the 'branding' or 'marketing' of Norway. Or, as a majority of political parties stated in the 1997 parliamentary debate: '(a) new opera house will be an important element in the marketing of Norway as a cultural nation' (Innst. S.no.225(1997–1998), 15).

Becoming a cultural nation

The use of an economistic 'marketing' and 'branding' terminology should not prevent us from recognising the national significance that politicians attached to the Opera House. Inherent in much of what we have said about the framing of the Opera House project as a vehicle of display is that this project was framed as a matter of nation-building. In part, this was signalled by the use of a national vocabulary in proposals to parliament and in parliamentary debates throughout this political process. Here, the tendency was for politicians to refer to 'the nation', 'the Norwegian people' or 'the entire country', rather than to 'users', 'citizens' or 'the population'. In part, this was signalled by a situating of the Opera House in national time, as politicians underscored its significance for 'future generations' and 'centuries to come', or in other ways placed it in an unspecified distant future.[4] More specifically, politicians from across the party spectrum inserted the Opera House project into a narrative about Norway's historical development as a 'cultural nation'.

This is illustrated by the parliamentary debate on the first government proposition for the Opera House project in 1997. At this time, the government's ambition was for the Opera House to open in 2005, as a part of the 100th anniversary of the dissolution of Norway's union with Sweden. Commenting on the anniversary, members of the government coalition parties noted that:

> Norway could thereby take its place among the other European nation states. Norway's strong cultural position in Europe at this time, with Nansen, Ibsen, Bjørnson and Grieg, was undoubtedly involved and made what happened in 1905 possible. These members believe that building a new opera house will mean

> that an important national cultural institution that the country lacks will be put in place. (Innst. S. no. 225 (1997–1998), 18)

In the final parliamentary debate in 2002, a representative from the Christian People's Party reiterated the statement from five years before. He referred to an editorial in the *Aftenposten* newspaper, which argued that the Opera House was 'not enough to rid the country of its image as an delayed cultural nation' and added that 'even if an opera building is not enough by itself to create a cultural nation, we are at least taking a decisive step in the right direction' (Report and voting in parliament 2002, 3177).

These quotations alert us to a slide in meaning that was characteristic of the politicians' use of 'cultural nation' in the debate on the new Opera House. On the one hand, the concept was invoked as an affirmation of the 'strength' and 'qualities' of Norway's artistic and cultural life, indicating that Norway's role as a cultural nation was a reality to be celebrated. On the other hand, the concept was put forward as an aspirational goal or moral obligation, drawing attention to the country's deficiencies when it came to cultural life and its plight to *become* a cultural nation. More specifically, the Opera House was envisaged as a project that would make up for an essential deficiency in Norway's national culture. In some cases, politicians referred to the Opera House as the single missing piece that could elevate the country up to an equal footing with other nations, such as when a representative of the Conservative Party noted that, with the decision to build the Opera House, Norway would no longer be a 'contrarian country ("*annerledesland*") in this domain' (Report and voting in parliament 2002, 3179). In other aspects, politicians assigned the project as only part of the remedy to a broader deficiency of Norway as a cultural nation, the relative absence of a historical high culture.

In these ways, the debate on the new Opera House clearly evoked the nineteenth century cultural policy project of fostering a national culture that would bring Norway up to the level of other European nations. However, at the same time as the debate was framed as a continuation of this nation-building project, it was also made clear that the country now found itself in a very different position from two centuries before. As we have indicated, a recurring topic in the debate on the new Opera House was its importance as a symbol of 'modern Norway'. While the precise interpretation of the 'modern Norway' phrase was never specified in the Opera House debate, it is reasonable to assume that this pointed to a perception of Norway as an advanced society, with a generous welfare state and a high level of trust in public institutions. In keeping with this image, the country could be seen to have a moral obligation to spend its wealth in a dignified manner, and one way of doing so was to convert the wealth into cultural capital. On fending off the criticism from the Progress Party, representatives of the majority argued that the investment in the Opera House would make Norway a 'richer' nation, and that if the country did not choose to afford this investment, Norwegians would be 'poorer'. In the words of a representative from the Socialist Left Party, it would be better for Norway to be recognised through the 'symbolic value of a prominent opera than to be identified as a small, rich, and sometimes selfish oil nation far up north' (Report and voting in Parliament 2002, 3182).

This alerts us to another entailment of the 'modern Norway' phrase. The Opera House debate took place at a time when Norway found itself in a highly privileged financial position, due to income from its oil and gas industry. In the 1990s, the country had entered into a period of unprecedented wealth, as it started to amass income from the oil and gas industry in what today has become the world's largest sovereign wealth fund (Sovereign Wealth Fund Institute 2023), as the Norwegian economy was on the path of outgrowing those of its historically dominant neighbours, Sweden and Denmark. When the Minister for Culture, Valgjerd Svarstad Haugland from the Christian People's Party, addressed the 2002 parliamentary debate, she underscored that Norway most definitely 'could afford' the Opera House. She noted that medieval Norway had prioritised the building of the Nidaros Dome [a cathedral in the city of Trondheim] and added that 'if we cannot prioritise this [i.e. the Opera House], given the condition our country is in today – then when will we ever be able to

build an opera house of this kind?' (Report and voting in parliament 2002, 3186). Thus, if one of the premises for the Opera House debate was that modern Norway had a moral obligation to carry out this project, another was that this was well within its financial capability. One way of viewing the Opera House and other iconic cultural buildings (the Deichman Main Library, the Munch Museum, the Astrup Fearnley Museum and the National Museum) that were established in Oslo in the following years is as monuments to Norway's wealth in the 1990s and 2000s.

Yet another premise that was brought to bear in the debate was politicians' conviction that modern Norway possessed the creative capabilities needed to fulfil the hopes and aspirations for the Opera House project. From our descriptions of the debate on this project, it should be clear that it was permeated by explicit or implicit comparisons with other European countries, and in particular Nordic countries. In part, politicians drew attention to contemporary iconic cultural buildings, such as the Sydney Opera House or the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, as a standard which the Opera House in Oslo should aspire to. In part, politicians pointed to the 'old and beautiful' cultural buildings in European countries that 'are visited and admired by most people today' (Innst.S.no.225 (1997–1998), 19–20). To compensate for what Norway lacked in terms of historical high culture, they indicated that the best contemporary artists and architects the country could muster would have to cooperate on the construction of the Opera House, in order to showcase 'the value of Norwegian art in the year 2000' (Innst.S.no.225 (1997–1998), 20). Or, as a representative from the Conservative Party remarked in the final parliamentary debate: 'Actually, we will get Europe's most modern opera house' (Report and voting in parliament 2002, 3180). As envisaged by politicians, the Opera House was to be a demonstration to the world of the resources and creative capabilities of modern Norway.

Beyond the opera house

The framing of the Opera House project as a vehicle of display and as a continuation of the nineteenth century nation building project, as we have described, was foregrounded in speeches by dignitaries at its official opening in 2008. In his speech, the Minister for Culture, Trond Giske from the Labour Party, declared:

> We do not have many monumental buildings in this country, in that respect we have been characterised by prudence. We have the Nidaros Dome, which tells of our religious history; the wharf in Bergen, which tells of our shipping history; and the Holmenkollen [Ski Jump], which tells of our skiing history. This house will tell the story of our time and will unite us as a cultural nation. This is the great hall for the whole of Norway, which we will pass on to future generations.[5]

The reference to Norway as a cultural nation in the speech is illustrative not only of the debate on the Opera House project, but more generally of the government's framing of cultural policy in this period. In 2005, a coalition of the Labour Party, the Centre Party and the Socialist Left Party took over the government and initiated an ambitious programme to strengthen cultural policy, called *Kulturløftet* ('The culture boost'). In cultural policy documents from the centre-left government, this programme was presented in a brief manifesto that highlighted the government's aim to make Norway 'a leading cultural nation'. Most notably, this resulted in almost a doubling of the central government's budgetary spending on culture in two governmental terms (NOU 2013:4). As such, the *Kulturløftet* programme can be interpreted as a continuation of the project of making up for the deficiencies in Norway's national culture.

In 2013, a sentence was added to the section of the *Kulturløftet* manifesto that speaks of cultural nation, which now reads: 'Norway is a small country, but a strong cultural nation. The government operates on the basis of a vision that Norway should be a leading cultural nation' (Prop 1 S. (2013-2014), 11). In the same year, it was decided in parliament that Norway would go ahead with the construction of a new building for the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design at the Western Railway Station site. The political process that led to this decision was more convoluted than for the Opera House, as the decision in reality had been made when the Ministry of Culture bought the Western Railway Station for

this purpose in 2008. From the government proposition and debate in parliament in 2013, it is clear that the National Museum project was first and foremost discussed as a technical matter of providing the institution with a functional infrastructure for the preservation and exhibition of the national artistic and cultural heritage, and that there was less talk of Norway as a cultural nation, even though this topic did sometimes surface (Inst. 337 S. (2012–2013); Report and voting in parliament 2013).

However, by this time the Opera House was considered a great success (Berg and Larsen 2020). The Opera House has had extensive effects in terms of urban development in Bjørvika and Oslo, but there are some contradictions. While there have been established new cultural buildings in the area, such as the new Much Museum and the Deichman Library, the housing construction in the area has no social profile. The Opera House can show increased visitor numbers, but the most crucial effect seems to be the building's attractiveness, with the roof as part of the Harbor Promenade, as a destination for the city's population and visitors, both from Norway and abroad (Whist, Kalhagen, and Henningsen 2017).

Nevertheless, most political parties in parliament made it clear that the aim of the National Museum project was to do the same for visual art as the Opera House had done for opera (Berg and Larsen 2020; Inst. 337 S (2012–2013)). The continuity between the two political processes is striking: The government proposition and statements by politicians in parliament highlighted the National Museum project as the 'next big building project after the Opera House' (Prop. 108 S (2012–2013), 3). The aim was that the new National Museum should be visible in the city, and this was framed in line with the politics of display, both internally and externally:

> The overall museum facility should have an architectural level that shows that the National Museum is an ambitious and quality-conscious institution (. . ..) Overall, the new building must be a museum facility that will be noticed, both nationally and internationally. (Prop. 108 S (2012–2013), 2)

Thus, while the Opera House project was framed as a continuation of the nineteenth century nation-building project of making up for Norway's deficiencies as a cultural nation, the National Museum project was framed as a continuation of the Opera House project.

Conclusion

In many instances, cultural policy aims to promote non-materialistic values, such as artistic excellence, *bildung* and a critical public sphere, but the measures employed to achieve this are usually of a materialistic nature and predominately consist of forms of financial support for cultural life. The financial scale on which governments choose to provide for various kinds of cultural policy initiatives is therefore a strong indicator of their interests and priorities in this policy domain. At the start of this article, we highlighted that the investments made by the Norwegian government in the Opera House and the National Museum were exceptionally large in a policy domain otherwise marked by a struggle for small funds. Normally, national cultural policy initiatives in Norway are measured in millions of Norwegian kroner, but in the case of these iconic cultural buildings, the figures were in the billions (i.e. hundreds of millions of euros). This underscores the importance of these building projects as expressions of the Norwegian state's cultural policy priorities. Rather than as exceptional detours from the normal business of cultural policy, these projects should be viewed as a core engagement of the state in this domain of policy.

In this article, we have explored the motives that came to light in the political process related to the establishment of the Opera House in Oslo. Apart from the well-known goals of providing the population access to art and stimulating urban development, we have shown that this building project was framed as a means of fostering social cohesion and a common identity in the Norwegian population, and as a means of enhancing the country's international prestige. As such, our study suggests that governments' uses of culture for representative purposes, which we have referred to as politics of display, is not a bygone feature of *ancient regimes*, but an important driving force in the generation of cultural policy in contemporary liberal democracies. There are reasons to believe that

this applies to cultural policy initiatives at all levels of government, from the local to the supranational. Our study focuses on the national level and reveals how the Opera House project was framed as a continuation of a long-standing nation-building project of making up for the deficiencies in Norway's cultural life compared to European countries. For politicians in the Norwegian government and parliament, the Opera House project was seen as a vital step in Norway's development as a cultural nation, as were the *Kulturløftet* programme and the National Museum project. This should serve as a reminder to researchers of the continued importance of the national dimension in contemporary cultural policy in Norway and elsewhere.

Notes

1. This excludes the ministry's expenses for media, voluntary organisations, equality and administration (Prop. 1S (2022–2023)).
2. Eling (1999) makes a similar point in a study of French cultural policy under the presidency of Francois Mitterrand, when referring to its programme of *Grand Projets* (i.e. iconic cultural building projects) as a 'politics of grandeur'.
3. One exception is Takle's (2009) study of the establishment of the National Library as national reproduction. However, this study is not positioned within or picked up by the field of cultural policy research. The same applies to the planning research study noted above, which highlights national identity as justification for the Opera House project (Smith and Krogh Strand 2011).
4. As Benedict Anderson point out, nations are conceived as communities 'moving steadily down (or up) history' (Anderson [1983] 2006, 26)
5. https://www.nrk.no/arkiv/artikkel/operaen-er-apnet-1.5373104

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