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Values-Based Conservation in Practice Accessibility at Akershus Castle

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Abstract. Akershus Castle is one of Norway's most important historical monuments and is listed with the highest grade of protection. The earlier medieval castle from around the year 1300 is an arena for the Norwegian state and in use for such as government dinners and receptions. The castle is also an important tourist destination and is used for public events like concerts, etc. Until today, people in wheelchair have had to be carried into the buildings due to stairs and differences in levels inside. In the autumn of 2021 five measures that make large parts of the castle accessible, were completed. Making public buildings accessible has high priority in Norway. Having achieved this at Akershus Castle is of great symbolic value. During the process of defining the projects extent and measures the method *values-based conservation* was applied. This was done through involving several stakeholders in assessing and quantifying an array of values and criteria. On this basis it was possible to define the project, achieve the permits from the heritage authorities and get acceptance from the organisations representing people with disabilities. The result has been very well received by the public, stakeholders and by the cultural heritage authorities.

Keywords. Accessibility, Cultural Heritage, Equality

Introduction

Akershus Castle and Fortress is located at the seaward approach to Norway's capital, Oslo (Figure 1), and is one of the country's most important historical monuments. The fortress has been in continuous use for more than 700 years and is defined as a national monument. Today, the Norwegian government uses Akershus Castle for, among other things, government dinners and state visits. It is also a tourist destination receiving about 55,000 visitors a year. The castle also houses the Norwegian royal family's burial chamber. In the castle church, which is the Norwegian Armed Forces main church, services, baptisms, weddings, and concerts are held on a regular basis.

Until now, people in wheelchair have had to be carried, due to stairs and differences in level. It has not been a worthy solution. Ever since the turn of the millennium, various solutions have been studied to improve the situation. In the autumn of 2021 building works with five improvements were completed, giving improved accessibility to the most important parts of the castle (Figure 2).

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Figure 1. Akershus Castle and Fortress. (Photo: Erik Selmer/The Norwegian Defense Estates Agency)

1. Akershus Castle and Fortress

Akershus Castle and Fortress was erected as a medieval royal castle around the year 1300. In the 17th century, the castle was rebuilt into a Renaissance castle surrounded by bastions. After only a few decades, the castle began to decay, and was later used as military storage and archives. When Norway became an independent kingdom in 1905, the idea arose that Akershus Castle could become a symbol for the nation, and an extensive restoration was initiated to make the castle a place of representation for the Government. One of the most famous Norwegian restoration architects of the time, Arnstein Arneberg, was assigned to lead the work in the 1930s. Arneberg left his clear architectural signature on both the restored parts, and in his own interpretations when rebuilding parts that had been demolished throughout history.

2. Accessibility to a castle listed with the highest grade of protection

Akershus Castle is listed with the highest grade of protection. In Norway, all permanent cultural monuments dated before the Reformation in 1537, such as buildings, are automatically listed due to age value. It is not permitted to alter, move, excavate, cover, or conceal an automatically listed cultural monument without permission by The Directorate for Cultural Heritage. At Akershus Castle, the protection applies to the castle's exterior, interior, and courtyard as well as a protection zone around the castle. The extensive restoration of the 20th century is also defined as cultural heritage in the listing. All interventions required a dispensation by The Directorate for Cultural Heritage, and groundwork had to be supervised by an archaeologist.

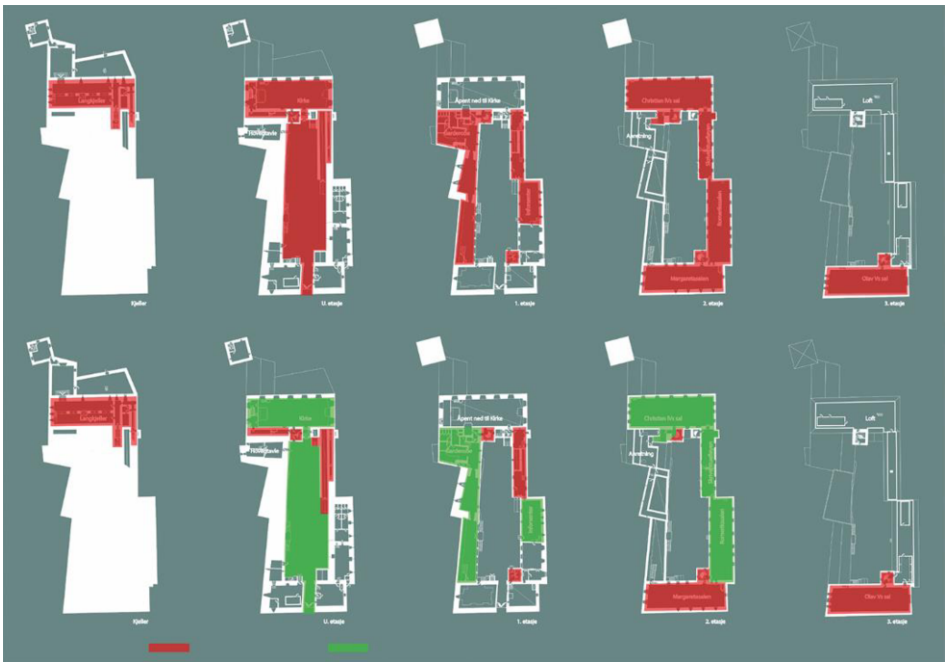

Figure 2. Areas that were inaccessible before measures shown with red hatches. Areas that became accessible after measures shown with green hatches. (Illustration: Arkitektskap AS)

3. Universal design (UD) vs. accessibility

In universal design (UD) the aim is that a main entrance and main functions should be accessible by everyone in an equal manner, and that no alternative entrance or special solutions should be necessary, such as wheelchair ramps and stair lifts. The project at Akershus Castle chose the working title "Improved Accessibility" because it was considered impossible to achieve a complete universal design in an historical environment as this, with the limitations the building and the Act concerning the cultural heritage presented. The distinction between the concepts of accessibility and universal design was an important clarification of expectations at the beginning of the project. Nevertheless, it was throughout the process an ambition that the measures chosen should be as close to universal design as possible. It was also emphasised that visitors should be able to move about without the need of assistance. Equality and dignity were therefore two of several value criteria that were listed at the beginning of the project and were given major importance.

At Akershus Castle the symbolic value in that all guests can use the same entrance and pass through the same doors is very strong, because the governmental ceremonies are linked directly to the core values of democracy. The Directorate for Cultural Heritage therefore allowed major alterations, to enable the main entrances and official rituals to be accessible to all guests attending official dinners and receptions.

4. User participation

Pursuing UD in listed buildings and cultural environments lies in an intersection between the consideration that everyone should be able to participate in society in an equal manner and the protection of cultural environmental values. When a cultural monument such as Akershus Castle is to be made accessible, there are two different special acts that are important: Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act and Act concerning the cultural heritage. The Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act allows exemptions if the consequences of measures may entail a disproportionate burden, which includes protection of cultural heritage values. The cultural heritage authorities have an ambition to make cultural monuments and sites as accessible as possible, but without significant architectural or cultural-historical values being lost. Good measures that enable cultural monuments and environments to be experienced by more people, also add extra value to the cultural monuments.

In the project at Akershus Castle, it was important to involve a wide range of stakeholders to achieve the best possible solutions, that all parties could accept. This included among others disability organizations, organizations within the cultural heritage field with a commitment to the castle, authorities etc. The involvement of the disability organizations was particularly important to safeguard the quality of the measures where requirements or guidelines in the legislation could not be achieved.

Figure 3. L.h.s: One of the halls before intervention. R.h.s.: A lifting platform is integrated in the floor. (Photo 1: Oslo Byggentreprenør AS; 2: A.M. Malkenes Mathiesen/The Norwegian Defense Estates Agency)

5. Method

In the process, principles from the value-based conservation method were used [1]. The purpose of the method is to be able to compile and weight different criteria through a participation process, in order to make objective choices to the highest possible extent. The process started with identifying all stakeholders who were affected, and then mapping what was important for each stakeholder. A feasibility study was then conducted, in which owners, staff and user of the castle, as well as the organizations mentioned above, were invited to participate. The study ended up with a total of 28 different measures for solving stepless access to different areas of the castle, as well as

improvements for people with visual impairments. The next step was to make the values measurable. The list of values and criteria, which included both concrete values, some of which are easily measurable, and intangible values, which are more subjective, were: functionality; ease of use and capacity; dignity; equality; extent of visual changes; extent of irreversible measures; impact on fire safety and evacuation; durability, operation, and maintenance; cost and risk.

5.1. Functionality

It was a goal that all solutions should be intuitive in use, and that they should facilitate orientation, so that visitors should feel safe. Few of the guests invited to the formal events know the castle well, and many will be a little nervous and excited when they arrive at a government dinner. In such a situation, it becomes especially important to avoid situations that can feel unpleasant or stigmatizing, and thus impair the experience of the visit.

It was also important that all guests, regardless of functional level, should follow the same route and be able to participate on equal terms during formal events, such as dinners and receptions as well as ceremonies in the church. It was a goal that there would be no need for special assistance to be able to use the installations. Another important aspect was that the technical installations or interventions chosen should not appear unappealing or have a negative impact on the castle's architectural qualities and interiors, nor be perceived as stigmatizing for those who must use the specific installations. It was therefore crucial that all interventions were to be executed with the highest quality in design, materials, and craftsmanship (Figure 3 and 4).

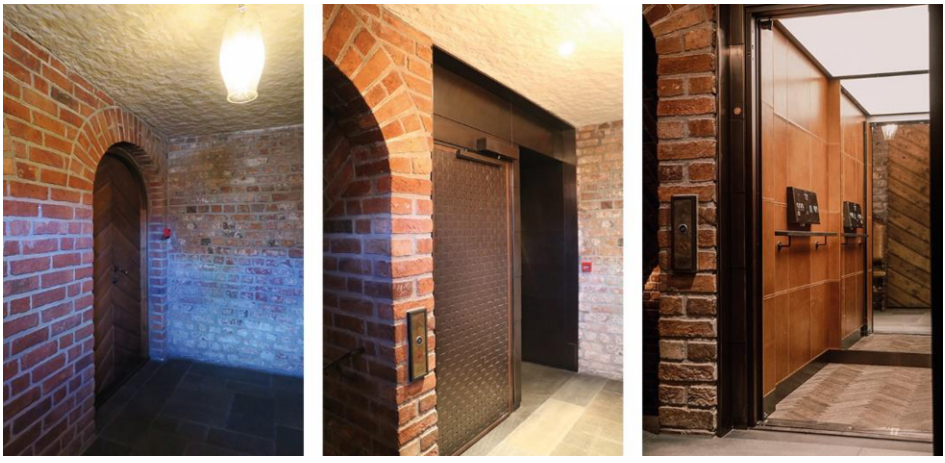

Figure 4. L.h.s.: The hall in the second floor before intervention. In the middle: An elevator has been fitted inside. R.h.s: Elevator interior. (Photo 1 and 2: Marianne Brenna; 3: Anne-Margrethe Malkenes Mathiesen/The Norwegian Defense Estates Agency)

5.2. Heritage values

Values associated with cultural monuments are not static but will always be influenced by contemporary views and by context. Taking on a project of this complexity today, the approach and theory applied differ from those that were the dominant ones in the 1930s, when the last major change at Akershus Castle took place. In the feasibility study, therefore, the castle's cultural-historical values were analysed and assessed again, in the light of today's understanding of the castle, its history, symbolic values and cultural heritage values in general.

In the feasibility study, two specific criteria were applied to assess the impact on the castle's cultural-historical values: the extent of irreversible interventions and the extent of visual changes. Irreversible interventions, look at the consequences of having to demolish and make interventions in existing structures – emphasizing the importance of avoiding interventions in masonry and structures from the Middle Ages, as far as possible. Visual changes, look at how changes and additions would affect the castle's architectural and historical values and could potentially impair the overall appearance, as well as aesthetic qualities, documentation value, historical timelines, experience value etc. Today's need for new functions should not be hidden, but instead carried out with such high quality that they add new values to the castle.

5.3. Technical conditions

When choosing technical solutions and materials, special emphasis was placed on durability and the possibility of being able to easily carry out maintenance and obtain new parts for replacements. This applied both during implementation and after completion. It was also important that future repairs can be carried out without the needing structural interventions. It was essential that the solutions chosen would not require much supervision to be operational. It was also an absolute requirement that the interventions should not imply restrictions on escape capacity and thus affect fire safety.

Figure 5. L.h.s.: The courtyard before intervention. R.h.s.: An elevator tower has been established in connection with the new stair. (Photo 1: Arkitektskap AS; 2: M. Brenna)

6. Accessibility vs. cultural heritage

The five main measures which have been completed are two elevators, two lifting platforms and one ramp. In addition, modification of several doors and various improvements for people with visual impairments have been carried out. Throughout the project, assessments have been made to balance the consideration between the UD and the cultural heritage protection.

Making then main entrance accessible is an example. The monumental and symmetrical limestone stair in the courtyard had to be dismantled entirely (Figure 5). The new stair was erected in an asymmetrical shape with a horizontal part connecting the elevator. The new stair had to be wider, and the landing higher than the original. All the old limestones in the front and railing where reused and adapted to fit the new shape. Due to the new hight an additional iron railing had to be mounted.

One of the most important alterations, however, was erecting the new tower, containing the elevator, in the courtyard. This represents a major change from a heritage perspective and the courtyard´s appearance (Figure 5). Thus, it was imperative to find the right balance making the elevator functional, easily visible, and as prominent as the main entrance – and making the addition blend into the historical environment. The result combines use of traditional materials such as limestone, bricks, and iron, but with a contemporary interpretation. The new tower is placed on the footprint of the first medieval tower at Akershus, but it has a clear contemporary character, and represents an addition to the castles long history of alterations.

The church entrance is an example where the limitations in the existing castle and heritage values limited the possibility for accessibility interventions. In spite of expanding the entrance hall, there was not enough room for an elevator and a stair (Figure 6). The result was fitting a lifting platform integrated in the stair (Figure 7). To obtain the overall architectural quality, the platform is covered in the same marble as the stair, making it almost invisible, when not in use. When it is in use the stair is not blocked for others, so the entrance complies fully with the aim to accomplish equality and dignity

Figure 6. L.h.s.: The church's entrance hall before intervention. R.h.s.: The church's entrance hall after intervention. (Photo: Oslo Byggentreprenør AS)

Figure 7. A lifting platform is integrated in the stair in the church's entrance hall. (Photo: Anne-Margrethe Malkenes Mathiesen/The Norwegian Defense Estates Agency)

7. Summary

Based on the overall assessment, five interventions were selected for execution. Furthermore, the process also defined the premises for how the new elements were to be integrated and appear in the listed castle.

The results of the feasibility study and the documentation from the participation process, were used to a full extent in the application process towards the different authorities involved.

The process clarified the complexity of improving accessibility in such a special cultural monument as Akershus Castle, and at the same time, giving everyone involved an insight and a greater understanding of the needs and special interests of other stakeholders. For everyone involved, there was a significant learning factor in participating in the process. There was also an acknowledgment that all interests cannot be fulfilled in a monument as important and complex as Akershus Castle.

The result has received very positive response from stakeholders and the public, and the accessibility measures at the castle have been included in the Directorate's collection of examples of successful improvements in listed buildings [2].

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