

The architect's challenge

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The house at 78 Drammensveien was built during the years 1876 to 1878 for Hans Rasmus Astrup, who in addition to being a Cabinet Minister must no doubt be described as one of our country's richest individuals at that time. The villa is a result of a competition for architects that was won by the architect H.M. Backer.

The residence was built in neo-classical style and was to form a dignified frame around the political and social activity of one of the most influential men of that time.

The Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters took over the property in 1910 and since then the building has been marked, through alternating periods, by decay and lack of maintenance as well as restoration and development. On the occasion of the celebration of the CAS' 10th jubilee it is natural to focus on the last word, namely development.

The structural and "cosmetic" alterations that have been made in the course of time were on the whole monitored and followed up by antiquarian authorities, especially over the past 20 years. The building is worthy of preservation, it is on what is called the yellow list of the Director General of Historic Monuments and is as such very largely protected against physical alterations.

With this as a sounding board our firm of architects was engaged in 1990 to make things suitable for an international research centre in the building's unused areas in respectively the basement and the attic storey. For us as young architects excitement and dubious self-confidence conquered awe and respect for the superb piece of contemporary architecture Backer had drawn roughly 120 years earlier.

The areas in question in the basement had in their day contained inter alia the main kitchen in the house and various service rooms and storerooms. The attic story contained, in addition to a turret room for Astrup's children, on the whole unused and cold areas without any natural light. Seen as a whole these areas made a seemingly depressing impression.

Gravity and despair, and sometimes regret at having taken such a task upon ourselves, were slowly but surely overcome by inspiration from the building's soul and intrinsic value as well as the never flagging enthusiasm of those who had commissioned us.

There was a kind of naturalness in the notion that the centre's architectonic expression and planning must be subordinated to the original structure and aesthetics of the building. Functional solutions and choice of materials were thus adopted with an eye to providing a discreet contrast with what was there already, where the original is always dominant.

Every attempt was made to satisfy today's requirements for technological facilities, and not least air-conditioning, in a workplace by integrating service equipment into new constructions so that it is to the least possible degree noticeable in the visual whole.

Superordinate quality considerations and different strategic challenges found their solution in dialogue and co-operation with those who had commissioned us, at the point of intersection between economics, functionality and least possible future maintenance. Only the future will provide the answer to whether this has been successful.

In conclusion, in deep gratitude for having been shown the trust that lay in being allowed to contribute to the designing of the centre, we want to wish the CAS “Many happy returns of the day” on the occasion of its 10th birthday. The house in Drammensveien and the life within it will always be dear to our hearts.



From the Centre's sitting-room with its fireplace (Amdahl Strøm & Cappelen Arkitekter AS)