



Pipe Dreams of the *Nouveaux Riches*: How Norway Mixed Oil and Water at Expo '92

By
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One does not have to be a radical to acknowledge that the display of riches often, if not always, comes at a cost. When capitalists wallow in items of conspicuous consumption, this privilege is brought to them by farm hands in fields and workers in factories. The cost itself, however, is not always on display. Indeed, a case can be made that a display of riches can only work if the cost is somehow masked, glossed, marginalized, kept in the dark, made invisible. This dynamic of display is certainly characteristic of world exhibitions, which, one could argue, make an art form out of selecting what to put forth and what to leave in the dark. Considered as forms of display, world expos are calculated *façades*, they are outward-facing fronts that intentionally fail to tell us what lurks behind. They are performances, one could say, that produce “strategic ignorance” (Proctor and Schiebinger 2008; McGoey 2019).

In this essay, I will turn my attention to Norway’s pavilion at the 1992 World Expo in Seville, Spain, to understand what this display can tell us about Norway in the early 1990s, but also, to poke into the costs and, more broadly, the consequences of what was on display. My argument is that Norway’s ’92 pavilion reveals a nation that, several decades after it first discovered oil in the North Sea, was finally beginning to see itself as a petroleum nation. At the same time, and precisely because it had begun to take on a petroleum identity, Norway faced a conundrum, which was to combine its role as an emerging petroleum producer with its reputation for being an “environmental pioneer” (Anker 2020). The ’92 pavilion, an unconventional structure whose overarching theme was the “cycle of water” and which had as its main element a huge pipe detached from its surroundings, implicitly proposed a solution to this problem: *Norway could mix oil and water*. Drawing freely on techniques of association and dissociation, it could make petroleum extraction and nature preservation appear as two sides of the same coin, or as wholly unrelated, as need be. The pavilion thus offers an early

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example of what, throughout the 1990s and in the 2000s, emerged as a central *topos* of Norwegian political discourse, namely that there is no conflict between Norway's ambitions as a petroleum nation and its ditto as an environmental frontrunner. In fact, in the moral logic that emerged from the early 1990s onwards, Norway's petroleum extraction and environmental ambitions were two sides of the same coin. This piece of petroleum propaganda is the legacy not just of Norway's '92 pavilion, but, more broadly, of the self-congratulatory Norwegian national identity that took form in the 1990s.

World Expos – Mega-Rhetorics of Display

World expos are tremendously complex phenomena, and not just in a practical sense. Umberto Eco, who had a keen sense of this complexity, once pointed out that the analysis we are inclined to make of world expos depends “on the point of view from which we look at the phenomenon,” and that we in principle could study it from the perspective of “cultural history, in sociological terms, in architectural terms, or from the point of view of visual, oral, or written communication.” And since “an exposition presents itself as a phenomenon of many faces, full of contradictions, open to various uses, we are probably entitled to interpret it from all these points of view” (Eco 1983: 289). In this text, my point of view will be that of rhetoric, specifically the kind of cultural rhetoric which, according to Steven Mailloux, aims to “use rhetoric to practice theory by doing history” (1998: 69). This means I draw on rhetorical terms and phenomena as analytical tools, that I am trying to make sense of Norwegian identity at a particular point in time, and that my main way of doing so is to engage with history – in this case, the archives on the '92 expo at the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

My starting point will be so-called *rhetoric of display*: In rhetorical terms, expos are neither a form of investigation (forensics), nor an exchange about future action (deliberation), but a form of praise – self-praise, to be precise. This places them in the category of the *epideictic*. According to tradition, the function of this genre was to offer either praise or blame, what one would typically do by selecting, highlighting, and describing particular characteristics of the object under consideration. In contrast to the two other genres, which were counted as *pragmatikoi* – in other words as things to be worked through and decided on by citizens – performances in the epideictic genre were just that: *performances*. They were rhetorical rituals, and were, tellingly, associated first and foremost with the itinerant Sophists who, as non-citizens, could not take part in pragmatic affairs of the *polis* (Pepe 2013; Pernot 2015).

Although the epideictic genre was long considered secondary to the primary two, the “new rhetoric,” which started circulating from the 1950s onwards, would

establish just how central displays are to human culture, sociality and – even – politics. The impetus was provided by Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, who suggested that epideictic was important to political deliberation because the epideictic display “strengthens the disposition toward action by increasing adherence to the values it lauds” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 50). In recent decades, epideictic has increasingly come to be seen as a preparation for action, as a sort of cultural groundwork for politics, as a rhetorical space in which values are put forth, considered, evaluated, and – most of the time – confirmed. As Jeffrey Walker has argued, epideictic “shapes and cultivates the basic codes of value and belief by which a society or culture lives,” which in turn means that it “shapes the fundamental grounds [...] that will underlie and ultimately determine decision and debate in particular pragmatic forums” (Walker 2000: 9).

Recent scholarship on epideictic has widened its scope greatly, not just to consider the wider importance of the genre, but also, to take an interest in a greater variety of epideictic forms. Hence, rhetoric research on this genre no longer deals exclusively with speeches, but also with written texts, social events, and – indeed – physical structures. A notable contribution to this branching out of the study of epideictic is Lawrence Prelli’s volume *Rhetorics of Display*, where the central idea is precisely that what such displays “make manifest or appear is the culmination of selective processes that constrain the range of possible meanings available to those who encounter them” (Prelli 2006: 2). On this view, epideictic displays structure the attention of the audience; they send the audience’s interpretive efforts along certain routes by their selection of what to put forth, what to subdue, and how to assemble the constellation of elements that make up the display. “[T]he meanings manifested rhetorically through display are functions of particular, situated resolutions of the dynamic between revealing and concealing,” argues Prelli, or more directly: “[W]hatever is revealed through display simultaneously conceals alternative possibilities; therein is display’s rhetorical dimension” (ibid.).

This lens is arguably well suited to my purposes here. First, it highlights how Norway’s pavilion at Seville involved strategic selection and narrative presentation of certain characteristics of the nation, and second, it suggests a link – though not necessarily one of simple causality – between the values expressed in and by the pavilion and Norwegian politics.

I should add that, if Expo ’92 offered Norway an occasion to work through what image of itself it wanted to project in the 1990s, this occasion coincided with what several scholars have argued was a time of significant change for the world expo format. Some scholars suggest, for instance, that world expos have shifted from being emblematic expressions of modernity (see Roche 2000), to taking on certain “postmodern” or also “neoliberal” features, incorporating de-polarization (Luscombe 2014: 69), personalization, and sentimentalization (Smits and Jansen

2012). This might lead us to think that world expos now are important venues for what has come to be thought of as “the competition state,” “nation branding,” and “national reputation management” (see Angell and Mordhorst 2015) – that is, the idea that the state, at the end of the twentieth and start of the twenty-first centuries, has been called upon to behave more like commercial entities (see Jansen 2008).

In Penelope Harvey’s somewhat older case study of the ’92 expo, however, she insisted that expos remain “hybrids” – that, despite their adapting to new forms, they still carry around their own history. She suggested that world fairs were always about “selling goods *and* ideas” [emphasis added], and that while participating countries “sought to make money by stimulating markets and boosting trade, [...] they also looked to produce associations between consumer items and the cultural aspirations of an emergent bourgeoisie” (1996: 104).

Considering both of these views, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the Seville event was held at a junction between the old and the new. It is not so clear that we can appeal to any great “shift” to make sense of the Seville event; rather, a more sensible starting point seems to be that it came at a moment marked by an extraordinary strong sense that, with the end of the cold war, *things were about to change* – we were moving out of the world we had known and into somewhere new. Indeed, in its official guide, Expo ’92 made this junction explicit as its basic rationale:

The turn of the century is a time for assessing the past and tackling the future. And this is exactly what the Seville 1992 Universal Exposition does: it is at once a digest and a preview. In celebrating the achievements of the human race, it also celebrates our hitherto untapped potential. Seville provides a link between the past and the future, considers each in the light of the other, and intertwines the two in a way that illuminates the issues of our time. (cited in Harvey 1996: 22).

In rhetorical terms, what the Expo was proposing here was the use of what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca called “association,” which refers to processes by which disparate things are made to form a unity (as opposed to “dissociation,” which refers to processes by which wholes are made to appear separate) (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969: 190). As I will argue, Norway’s pavilion did not just connect the past and the future, the old and the new, it used association to connect petroleum and environmental protection. In doing so, it provided an early argumentative template for the increasingly petrolized national identity which emerged in Norway throughout the 1990s.

“If You Want to Be Someone ... Profile Yourself!”

Norway’s pavilion at Expo ’92 did not emerge out of thin air, but was the product of a protracted decision process, first, about whether or not to join, and then, about what the pavilion should try to convey. That said, Norway’s decision to join was not particularly troubled. One attraction was that the Seville event was projected to become a major installment of the world expo, and among its selling points were that it was the first world expo in Europe since 1958, that it was made in celebration of the 500th anniversary of Columbus’ discovery of America, and that it partly coincided with the 1992 summer Olympics in Barcelona. When Norway’s path towards a commitment was quicker and apparently more straightforward than that of many other countries, this was in part the result of the experience from the previous Expo, in Vancouver, in 1986, which was widely hailed as a victory for Norway’s image work abroad.

No more than halfway through the ’86 exhibition, the tabloid *Dagbladet* described Norway’s main pavilion as a “thundering success.” In one article, focusing on the crown prince and princess’ visit to the exhibition, *Verdens Gang* wrote: “In the outdoor arena in the heart of the Expo area in Vancouver, Canada, 30 000 people rose, under the bright sun, to sing [Norway’s national anthem] ‘*Ja, vi elsker*.’ Norwegian flags, folk costumes from Telemark, and the crown prince and princess brought tears to the eyes of many Norwegian-Canadians” (Møst 1986: 9). Interestingly, the newspaper also reported that the crown prince and princess would be visiting an elderly home at which 50 of 86 of the residents were Norwegian – though no mention was made of “Old Olaf,” a Norwegian emigré who had famously been evicted from his long-time home in the Patricia Hotel to make room for Expo tourists, and who subsequently starved himself to death (Freed 1986; Baker 2016). Summing up his experiences from the exhibition as it was closing down, the director of the Norwegian Export Council, Arne Langeland, told *Aftenposten* that, “Considered as a profiling of Norway, our participation in EXPO 86 in Vancouver has been a thundering success,” dubbing the media attention devoted to Norway “extraordinary,” and adding that, “two million people have visited the two Norwegian pavilions, and as the only Nordic nation, Norway has gotten a lot of extra attention and PR” (Myhrvold 1986: 24).

The perception that Norway’s contribution to Expo ’86 had been extraordinarily successful was used repeatedly to justify that Norway should commit to the ’92 event. Starting with the Export Council director, who suggested already in 1986 that Norway, due to its success in Vancouver, should commit to the world expo in Seville, this connection reappeared throughout the deliberations, and was even used in the formal recommendation to Parliament to approve Norway’s participation in Seville.¹

Even when Expo ’86 did not figure explicitly, it still appeared to function

as evidence for the more general idea that this type of event, even if it did not offer tangible economic returns, could nevertheless “place Norway on the map.” So when the Norwegian government, in May 1988, established a commission to head up the work with a potential Norwegian pavilion in Seville – a commission hosted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, led by veteran diplomat and former ambassador, Håkon Freihow, and with the experienced bureaucrat Tore Tanum as vice-commissioner – the idea of getting on the map quickly became a central motive for the commission. This idea rested, in turn, on the idea that the world was now shifting from the somewhat restricted, block-based, reality which had been in place throughout the cold war towards an increasingly open, globalized, and multipolar reality – in which Norway was fast becoming more of an international player, not least thanks to its vast petroleum resources.

It transpires from the commission’s deliberations that not even *nouveau riche* Norway could take success on this new international arena for granted. For while the world that was emerging was no longer plagued by cold war, it was characterized by a new, and more unpredictable, *competition* between nations. The perceived importance of standing out in an international playing field of nations comes up time and again in the commission’s internal communications about the expo. One memorandum notes that the “world expo in Seville will have an importance beyond what we have seen with similar exhibitions in the past,” and explains that this has to do with “today’s fierce international competition and the establishment of the EC’s ‘internal market.’” These circumstances, the memo notes, means that, “If you want to be someone in today’s international competition society, you have to profile yourself as an interesting partner. This is the case not least in areas like industry, trade, shipping, tourism, but also in the cultural arena.”² The world expos were as made for this international competition between national profiles: “Experiences from Expo ’86 [...] shows that exhibitions like this primarily are important as Norway-profiling,” noted another memo, while adding that with increasing European integration in the EEC, “Norway needs to leave a mark especially vis-a-vis the Southern European nations as a part of Europe.” The “world exhibition in Seville can become an important arena for this kind of profiling,” it continued, “as the exhibition will be an important political, cultural, and economic meeting place.”³

Against the commission’s view of the general circumstances, would be placed a more specific story which said that Norway’s image abroad was anything but impressive. Proposing an addition to the recommendation to Parliament, the commission wrote that, “Norway is not well known abroad,” and added that, “Recent surveys indicate that Norway’s international profile is weak, among decision-makers as well as ordinary consumers.” For this reason, it continued, “It is imperative for Norwegian export industry that a positive image of Norway be

established, as a modern industrial nation, a supplier of high-quality products, a reliable business partner, and an attractive tourist destination.” In the years to come, the text proposed, “a challenge rests upon us to make Norway known in those markets and environments where the image of Norway matters to Norwegian business initiatives.” And it was for this reason that Norway should join the Seville event, to “take advantage of the world exhibition in order to profile Norway.”⁴

These sentiments appear to have been widely shared, not just in the commission, but also in the industry organizations with which it communicated. In correspondence with the commission, the Norwegian Alliance of Service Providers [*Norges Tjenesteforbund*] expressed its view that, “Norway will in the coming 10 years have to put increasing effort into internationalization and export of products and services,” and added that Norway now had a “unique opportunity to use the exhibition as an instrument in its profiling and export activity.”⁵ And the Federation of Norwegian Industries [*Norges Industriforbund*] added, in one of its letters, that Norway should take advantage of the opportunity offered by the expo, since, “Good advertising for Norway will trickle down on businesses that operate in the international market.”⁶

In talking points prepared for a formal dinner with leaders of major industrial companies, in April 1989, the need to exert an effort on behalf of Norway’s image abroad was laid out in no uncertain terms: “At the start of the 1990s we face major transition tasks in the Norwegian economy which demands an effort from all of us. In times like these, it helps to have a cause that can tell us that we can make a difference, that can create enthusiasm and mobilize our efforts for a shared goal.” The *cause* referred to here was not, of course, Expo ’92, but the decision, announced on 15 September 1988, that the ’94 winter Olympics would be held in Lillehammer. This decision clearly energized the general effort to profile Norway from early 1989 onwards, and this renewed energy certainly spilled over into the planning of Expo ’92. The Seville event was now written into a longer trajectory, which was dubbed “a long-term campaign to create a *stronger* and more *positive* profile of Norway to the benefit of Norwegian export industry.” The dinner was organized for the purpose of allowing a working group at the Council for Norway Information to present and garner support for its ideas about what this stronger and more positive profile would be – though, arguably, they appeared to keep things at a rather basic level:

For our export industries and for Norway’s opportunity to make its influence heard in international affairs, it is important to consider how foreigners perceive of us, what characteristics and qualities our trade and cooperation partners associate with Norway. [...] For example,

it is no help to our tourist industry if Norway is seen to be cold and expensive. Contrariwise, associations that point towards Norway being a country of clean nature and healthiness can promote tourism to Norway as well as export of fish and other foods.⁷

Admittedly, not everyone offered their immediate support. Notably, the Ministry of Finance advised against Norway's participation in Expo '92, on the grounds that one could not justify spending the money on profiling. Norway had already been awarded the '94 Olympics, and Finance felt this would offer "a very strong profiling of Norway, and hence have the same objective as participation at a world exhibition." Their objection was trumped by the ministries of trade and foreign affairs, however, who pointed to the successes of Expo '86, to the important "political and cultural reasons for Norway's participation," and also, to the "common sense that that awareness and knowledge about the political, cultural, and technological level of a country are important prerequisites for increasing economic exchange."⁸

“A Long Tradition of Innovation”

The discussion would soon turn from stipulations about the general potential of joining the Expo to the question of exactly *how* Norway ought to present itself. A key actor in this regard, of course, was the architecture agency who won the bid to design the pavilion. It is important to recognize, however, that the creativity of the architects was restrained and framed by premises which had become well-entrenched – in the commission, if not necessarily in the nation as such – by the time the architects were brought in. When we look at the pavilion, then, what we see is not only a creative expression, but at the same time a validation of a particular national self-image, a strategic attempt to profile and position Norway in an international field of nations, and an influence of various interests, not least those of the financial sponsors.

Even before they had advanced the hurdle of a formal decision, the commission began to work on the premises for how Norway would project itself at Expo '92. Helped by its network of diplomats in various embassies, from whom they solicited input, the commission came to form an association between Norway as a natural/traditional country, on the one hand, and Norway as an industrial/innovative country, on the other.

A suggestion to this effect was made as early as in October 1987, when the ambassador in Madrid wrote to suggest that, "The objective for Norway's participation at the world exhibition would seem fairly obvious: to show that we are a country with long traditions for courage and ingenuity which, today, is being

followed up with a line of technological innovations.”⁹ While the combination of these two – potentially contradictory – elements into a single profile was perhaps not as “obvious” as this ambassador claimed, there was no doubt that his thoughts were widely shared, also within the commission. In a note to the government early in 1988, the MFA wrote that if Norway would commit to the “unique chance for profiling” offered by Expo ’92, the event’s main theme of “discovery” suggested the use of such figures as Nansen, Amundsen, and Heyerdahl, but at the same time, Norway should strive to “project itself as a modern and future-oriented industrial nation, where a series of industries builds on long tradition, in combination with modern technology.”¹⁰ For its part, the press and cultural division at the MFA suggested in a memo that the presentation of Norway should “incorporate Norwegian nature (environmental protection), the Norwegian model of society, Norwegian business and industry (technological development) and Norwegian culture.” And in its recommendation to the Government, the MFA stated that:

It is important that Norway stands out as a country with important contributions to make, both politically, culturally and technologically, to the development of Europe – in past, present, and future. The concept that has been developed in the proposal for the government provides a frame with ample opportunity to present Norwegian high technology products, at the same time as it seeks to convey central Norwegian contributions to political thinking, like share responsibility for the environment, quality of life and equal rights.¹¹

The association between old and new, between tradition and innovation, was no coincidence, but a strategic move within what the central actors now saw as a global competition game. Of course, the immediate justification for this combination was that the expo could serve several purposes: On the one hand, it could be used to attract tourists, for the purpose of which they could draw on well-established images of Norway’s nature, and on the other, it could be used to attract business partners, to make sure that Norway and Norwegian industry was remembered and considered for major industrial ventures and the like.

This combination can also be read as a sign, however, that it was not obvious which was the appropriate Norway to put forth, among the many possible ones. This posed somewhat of a problem, since, in general, the more elements one squeezes into a profile of this kind, the less of a *profile* it will actually be. Indeed, in the early stages, the various images of Norway that circulated in and around the commission’s deliberations were rather like a haphazard collection of elements that appeared to have only one thing in common: they could all be used to “sell” Norway internationally. As a concrete concept for the pavilion was being

discussed, in June 1988, the choice about which Norway to put forth was still very much open. Minutes from the meeting state that:

There were various views about the target audiences as well as about which parts of Norwegian culture and industry should be emphasized – including the mix between, on the one hand, “soft, cultural” values, focusing on nature experiences and wild nature, women in politics, the Vikings’ discovery of America, environmental protection (the Gro report?), Norway as a modern welfare society, and more, and on the other, Norway as a supplier of advanced industrial products, energy, high technology, and research.¹²

The challenge facing the commission and its interlocutors, then, was to make their combination of various profiling elements appear as a single, unforced entity – as though the various elements had not been *placed* together, but simply *were* together. To speak with Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, they had to form a rhetorical “association,” that is, they had to make disparate things form a unity.

And, in fact, a consensus did emerge soon enough around the idea that the pavilion should be a “journey through Norway, where the above themes are introduced as one makes one’s way forward.” This concept would allow one to establish Norway as “an extraordinary tourist destination” by drawing on images of “pure nature, wild nature, healthy lifestyles, environmental protection, and in general – the traditional, green Norway profile that we know.” This was an image that could invite ridicule, the minutes noted, but it was, after all, “the one that foreigners already know.” An appeal with these more or less familiar images would have to be combined, argued the Export Council, with:

A profiling of Norway as a large-scale supplier of energy to Europe. With this as a starting point, one can present a broad range of energy-related industry where Norway has made a mark in Europe. Key words are oil, gas, shipping, computer technology, marine technology, hydropower – integrated throughout with the “soft” profile sketched above. The tension between the new and the old can underline the perspective of the expo, the discovery, the journey towards something new and exciting. In this way, the two perspectives introduced at the start, can be combined.¹³

The Export Council again appears to have been the central driver for this combination, as they wrote the MFA and the commission in October of that year, to underline that “it is important that the MFA emphasize to the architects that

it is modern Norway that is to be presented, and that [...] Norwegian business and industry, especially export-oriented activity, will be fully integrated into the presentation.”¹⁴

Norway’s Pavilion: Oil in the Hydrological Cycle

The young architects who had won the bid to design Norway’s pavilion were called *LPO*. A few years prior, before they had even graduated from architecture school, they had been chosen to develop the Vaterland area, a notoriously troubled part of downtown Oslo, which in the mid-1980s was finally being developed (Butenschøn and Lindheim 1987; Sejersted 1993). Except for a hot dog stand at Oslo’s central station, the Vaterland project was so far the only one they had to show for, but their plans projected a forward-leaning sensibility in tune with the boom days that had hit the capital in the mid-1980s, and featured a red-brick arena for conferences, sports, and cultural events, Oslo’s tallest skyscraper, and – not least – the long “indoor high street,” Oslo M (later to be renamed Galleri Oslo), which was pitched at the time as a “horizontal skyscraper,” and which has since earned notoriety as Oslo’s ugliest building.

The transactions between the steering group that was set up by the commission and *LPO* appear to have been almost without friction, and indeed, the architects’ basic concept quite diligently followed up the criteria laid down by the commission. In October 1988, they summarized their basic idea thus:

WATER will be the connecting line at the presentation of Norway at Expo-92 in Seville. Water here refers also to other forms, like ice and snow. – WATER is a good reference to convey modern Norway, its history and natural preconditions. – WATER is a good reference for presenting Norwegian business. – WATER is a good reference as a background for the Winter Olympics at Lillehammer 1994. – WATER is a good reference to touch on environmental protection and the future of the world community. – WATER is a good reference to attract attention in the expected heat of Seville.¹⁵

The architects explained further that the pavilion would consist of three parts, “the ICE CASTLE,” “the HIKE,” and “the DOCK.” The first would be a sort of curiosity to attract visitors’ attention, and would take the form of an iced portal, pimped up by light and sound, which doubled as the entrance to the main part of the pavilion, the pipe, in which one found the main attraction, the HIKE. The hike was organized as a stroll through the inside of the pipe, the walls being used to project images and videos – a concept that was considered fairly advanced at the time.

In terms of its content, the HIKE progressed through a series of sequences, the conceptual rationale of which was to take the visitor through the natural cycle of water, or as they also put it, “a journey through Norway from the mountain peaks to the bottom of the ocean.” The ambition was that the pipe would “create a total illusion of the journey through Norway, with full control of climate, lights, and sound. The audience will literally follow the passage of water from the mountain to the sea.” This spectacular display would then end in the DOCK, which would work as a sort of landing site, hence the name, and which would offer space for the restaurant, souvenir shop, etc.

The architects also revealed some of their thinking behind their design, which was to “strive for a maximum alignment of technique and message.” This did not mean, they explained, “that the technique is the goal, but that the message is conveyed through intentional use of forms, construction, materials, and display techniques.” If this was to mean anything at all, it would have to be that the pavilion sought to present Norway as fusion – an untroubled union – of nature with industry. The overarching concept – what we must presume the architects were referring to when they talked about the pavilion’s “message” – was water and the hydrological cycle, hence a natural phenomenon, which, with the fortuitous circumstance of Norway’s natural landscapes, could be rendered as an appealing content, i.e., as a dramatic “journey through Norway from the mountain peaks to the bottom of the ocean.” The interior of the pipe itself was used as a projector screen which one would walk through, thus simulating the natural cycle of water, while at the same time rendering an experience of the seasons. The idea was that travelers would go through an ice castle, the high mountain, the valley, the fjord, the sea, under the sea, experience a turning point (where “the water would arise from the sea”), and an aftermath.

The idea of modeling the display on a natural cycle came with certain challenges, however, not the least of which was the need to dramatize, to tell a story, where one was ultimately lacking. In April of 1990, as the architects had begun to operationalize the content to display within the pipe, they wrote:

To begin with the most dramatic thing; LIFE. Living water, the beautiful, the strength, human creation in creation, despite of, because of, look at what we have accomplished, how clever we are, what future awaits us. Water is of your concern. And to continue: DEATH. Without water. Without clean water. How vulnerable. Water is of your concern. Water is STRENGTH, water is VULNERABLE. With this as a starting point, we can build a dramaturgy.¹⁶

But while the concept of the pavilion emanated from nature, the forms, the construction, and the materials were all characteristically *industrial*. In essence, the pavilion consisted of a huge, detached pipe made of concrete – an image of industry of there ever was one, and not one coincidentally chosen. Indeed, the architects pointed out that various ways of promoting Norwegian businesses – “Key words could be ship and oil platform models, fish farming, etc.” – could be integrated into their design, and they also emphasized that the actual pipe itself made “reference to Norwegian bridges, tunnels and not least concrete constructions within OFF SHORE,” and that “the relevant businesses should be interested in using Expo-92 to market such products.”¹⁷

And so they did: In August 1990, the commission’s leader, Freihow, had talked to the head of the national oil company, Statoil, on the phone, and on 28 August sent a letter to him, Harald Norvik, as he did to the other sponsors, asking for money. The request was made, as the ambassador put it, “with reference to the weight we put on oil and gas extraction in our presentation of Norway at the pavilion.” The following year, their budgets apparently somewhat strained, Freihow requested Statoil to up their pledge from 3 million to 4 million kroner: “As ‘tit-for-tat’ we would offer Statoil: 1) Profiling in the pavilion’s main element, the HIKE. Water is the theme for the Norwegian pavilion, and oil and gas extraction are central elements in the marketing of Norway in the HIKE.” This, however, was only the first of the perks Freihow offered. He also promised that Statoil would have free use of the pavilion’s V.I.P. room for up to 10 days; that they would market Statoil in the “informational material” displayed at the information desk; that a model of a Statoil oil platform would be placed in the pavilion’s pool; that ample use of the Statoil logo would be made at appropriate places throughout the pavilion; and, not to mention, that there would be media coverage – which the ambassador assumed that Statoil, as main sponsor, “would benefit greatly from.”¹⁸ In the end, Statoil would in fact commit to the project as its main external sponsor.

Associating Nature and Industry in Anti-Architecture

The innovative element of the design, of course, was the fact that this entire journey through a set of natural landscapes, which was modeled on a natural process (the hydrological cycle), was placed within a concrete pipe – in a daring mash-up of nature and industry. While the architects, with their partners in the steering group, had worked on wresting a story from the natural cycle, there remained challenges – even, one might say, oddities. The first was the connotations of water itself, which were not so untroubled as they had previously assumed, when they listed water as a “good reference” for most everything. Now, they had come to realize the need to establish, on the one hand, that water was indeed clean and

beautiful, but that it, at the same time, was also powerful and threatening. Their dramaturgic escape route was to acknowledge the threat represented by water, but nevertheless conclude that “we master the threat.”

A somewhat bigger challenge was that some of these dramaturgical elements could not so easily be coupled to the overarching concept. LPO and its partners had established four so-called story elements: *place; weather; water; technology and culture*. About the first three, they noted that they would be “edited tightly together and can overlap/replace each other. They tell one coherent story.” About the fourth, however, they noted that it “tells a different story that runs in parallel.”¹⁹ Here, then, the architects themselves had confronted the dramaturgical limits of their own innovative mixing of oil and water. What they, in essence, told themselves at this point was that the two main components of the Norwegian concept, nature/tradition and industry/innovation, did not, in the end, mix very well. While the high-flying architectural ideals they had expressed for the pavilion as such promised “a maximum alignment of technique and message,” they were not able to align a country associated with place, weather, and water with a country associated with technology and industrial innovation. Or, to be more precise, *align* was precisely what they had to do: Since this latter element could not go into a coherent story, as one replaceable element among others, it had to *run in parallel*. What they found they could not do, then, was to mix oil and water.

This conclusion would obviously not do for the public, however, so when the project was presented in brochures upon completion, these incompatible elements had been forced back together again, and no separation was apparent. Instead, there was an emphasis on how the various elements were connected, all of them seemingly caught up in the hydrological cycle somehow in a continuous process.

Once inside the tube, we embark on water’s journey through Norway, following its natural cycle, from the rain as it falls in the mountains, flows down and under the sea, and then evaporates, returning to the heavens. The weather changes. The seasons change. In a fantastic landscape we are introduced to Norway – a modern cultural and industrial nation. The journey provides a continuous panorama of images throughout the length of the tube. Over us, under us. In the water, with water. The end of the tube descends, and we find ourselves literally under water. (SBE 1992: 7)

In another, shorter, brochure issued alongside a press release, a similar mashing together of nature/tradition and industry/innovation is performed:

When visitors enter the Pipe they are taken along on a “journey” through Norway – with the water – from the high mountain to the sea. By the help of modern presentation techniques, the audience will experience the importance of water for the modern Norwegian society. Energy, marine transport, fishing, offshore and changing nature and climate are important key words. Environmental protection is the basic tone of the entire “journey.”²⁰

Considered more broadly as a work of architecture, the Norwegian pavilion was peculiar, to say the least. Of course, the same can be said of many world expo pavilions and, considering the underlying premise of the situation is to stand out from the competition, that is not so strange. But at the '92 event, Norway stood out with what was perhaps the most unconventional architectural form. It was a structure with clear elements of the postmodern tendency in architecture, perhaps the clearest nod in that direction being the spire-like structure that marked the entrance, which consisted of three thin poles to which was attached a series of triangles with holes in the centre. In more general terms, the pavilion as a whole arguably presented a deconstructive take on what an expo pavilion could be, if not also, on architecture. The contrast to the adjacent pavilions could hardly be more clear: In a promotion brochure, we can read that: “Behind Norway, Finland rises as a black wall. Denmark, with its white sails, is our neighbor to the left” (SBE 1992: 6). Both characteristically sleek and stylish structures, with apparent ambitions of timeless monumentality, these neighboring pavilions appear to represent Architecture, against which Norway’s pavilion expresses something like anti-architecture. In the same brochure, the Norwegian pavilion is described thus:

This is no traditional building; it is an installation comprised of several elements. Masts, beams and sails reflect Norway’s maritime character, while the striped cylinder of the ice tower resembles a lighthouse on the coast. Behind the ice tower is the pavilion’s main attraction, a 45 metre long tunnel which “floats” 1,5 metres above the surface of a pool which extends across the entire Norwegian site (SBE 1992: 7)²¹

The architects seem to have reveled in the possibilities offered by building a pavilion, and indeed, to have thought that those possibilities were practically endless. Although Norway’s pavilion, as I pointed out above, rested on a series of extra-architectural premises, these architects seemingly did not adhere to any premises laid down by architectural convention. One might of course argue that, as an architectural genre, “the pavilion” has fairly lax genre conventions, but Norway’s '92 pavilion takes this to the extreme – to the point where, as the

brochure rightly stated, the boundary between a building and an installation were blurred. As the architect of the sleek and stylish Danish pavilion put it, when interviewed for an informational film about Norway's pavilion, he could find no classical architectural ideals in the Norwegian installation, "but then," as he added, "that is also not the point of it." Had it not been for certain markers, like the "Noruega" banner at its entrance, a passer-by could easily have mistaken Norway's pavilion for a technical building of some sort.

Petrolization

A more speculative reading of the structure as such could point out that this blurring of boundaries, this transcending of genre, this sense of endless possibilities, was to become an increasingly central component of Norwegian national identity throughout the 1990s. This was mostly due, no doubt, to the experience of the '94 Winter Olympics, which was generally seen as an unprecedented success, and which gave Norwegians a prolonged boost of cultural confidence that would last for several decades (see Johansen 1995). As Kristin Clemet, a former minister for the liberal-conservative party and now a think-tank pundit, has put it in retrospect: "Suddenly, everything was possible" (Clemet 2019: 8). Lillehammer '94 provided a substantial part of the material that has since gone into the cultural memory of the 1990s in Norway, in a way that Expo '92 certainly did not. I would argue, however, that both the process and the projection of the Seville pavilion can be read as a sign that more fundamental changes were underway in Norway at the time.

One way, though not the only way, to approach that change would be to say that Norway was, at this time, becoming a true petroleum nation. In the transition from the 1980s to the 1990s, Norway went from a situation of *oil politics* to a situation of an *oil-infused political culture*. This transition was understood, to a certain extent, by commentators at the time. In 1989, for instance, the famous political scientist, Johan P. Olsen, pointed to an increasing "petrolization" of Norway, describing how "oil, and the money that comes with it, [was changing] people's expectations, political institutions and processes, and relations of power in society, irrespective of decisions made by political authorities" (Olsen 1989: 11). But even an analysis as prescient as this could not see clearly what was up ahead: Olsen saw certain signs of a peak and mused that the oil age in Norway might already be headed towards its end, that it might turn out to be no more than "an episode" in the country's history (Olsen 1989: 208).

The changes that the 1990s would bring to Norwegian economy, politics, society, and culture were seen more clearly in hindsight. Writing in 2001, historian Yngve Nilsen described how, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a "harmonious community of interests" emerged across the petroleum industry and political

elites, as the “conflict lines that were important in the oil political debate in the 1970s and 1980s gradually disappeared” (Nilsen 2001: 90). In short: Oil was becoming less an issue to be discussed, and more a premise for the discussion.

Some of this had to do with the fact that the oil sector in Norway was changing; the national oil company, Statoil, was growing more independent (and would in time lose some of its ties to the state), more international and expansionist, and, not least, more offensive in its public relations work (Ryggvik 2010; Sæther 2017). For the wider political culture, and surely for issues of national identity, what was even more important than the goings-on within the oil sector as such were the *consequences* of oil. In short, petroleum would make Norway one of the richest countries on the planet, and while it would obviously not be correct to say that the Norwegian oil age started in the 1990s, I believe it is accurate to say that this was the decade when the wealth of petroleum, and the narrative of Norway’s unique success in distributing it, took hold of the country’s political culture. As it turned out, Olsen’s only miscalculation was the resources still left to extract – apart from that, the *petrolization* of society has since proceeded mostly as he described. While still stopping short of becoming a “petro-state” proper, Norway’s course through the 1990s went from being an upstart on the outskirts of Europe to becoming the continent’s *nouveau riche* cousin. Nothing illustrates this journey better than the so-called Oil Fund. Established in 1990, it received its first deposit in 1996, and since then, the fund has grown to become the largest sovereign wealth fund in the world. On 25 October 2019, the Oil Fund commanded assets of a staggering 10.000 billion Norwegian kroner.²²

My main point here, however, is not that Seville marks the start of this “phase II” of Norway’s oil economy, but that it marks the start of an argument structure – a *topos* – that would become a key part of the propaganda strategy enacted during the subsequent decades, not just within the oil industry, but also among top politicians – including a long line of Prime Ministers, like Gro Harlem Brundtland and, not least, Jens Stoltenberg (see Nilsen 2001; Hovden and Lindseth 2004; Tellmann 2012; Boasson and Lahn 2017; Sæther 2017).

When I say that the Seville event marks the start of this *topos*, I am not suggesting it was the cause, as such, and certainly not that it was the sole cause. I am saying, rather, that Seville represented a “kairotic” moment for this argument, i.e., that it provided an occasion for rhetorical – epideictic – performance, an invitation to present Norway to the world, in a situation where the stakes were considered to be increasingly high. Norway seized that moment by presenting itself as a pragmatic combination of environmental frontrunner and (petro-) industrial spearhead.

The afterlife for the first phase of this *topos* was well described already in 2004, by Hovden and Lindseth, who noted that Norway, in 1989, “became the

first country in the world to set a stabilization target for CO2 emissions,” but that already by 1995, “this stabilization target was officially abandoned, and no new target for reducing domestic CO2 or greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions was set” (Hovden and Lindseth 2004: 63). They render this turnabout as a move from “national action” to “thinking globally,” that is, from a political discourse constrained by the idea that each nation had a responsibility – a moral duty – to stabilize or cut its own emissions to a discourse that instead sought worldwide distribution of cuts to enact international cost-efficiency, through so-called “flexible mechanisms” incorporated into the Kyoto agreement.

This turnabout was, as Nilsen (2001) also points out, supported by a broad implicit coalition of Norwegian elites. According to Hovden and Lindseth (2004), “large parts of the environmental administration, most political parties, trade unions and, last but not least, the entire business community and petroleum industry are ardent supporters of the TG [think globally] discourse and the maximum use of the Kyoto mechanisms” (Hovden and Lindseth 2004: 75). This broad alliance of powerful actors meant that the international effectiveness discourse throughout the 1990s worked its way into the mainstream, to become the leading motive and argumentative structure in the legitimation of petroleum.

This, of course, does not mean that there were no objectors, and the “think globally” discourse was always under a certain amount of pressure, most notably from environmental organizations. As communications scholar Øyvind Ihlen points out, however, the petroleum industry developed – from the late 1990s onwards – a set of rhetorical responses to this pressure. To retain the legitimacy and reputation of petroleum, representatives of the state-owned company, Statoil, but also many others, including leading politicians, would typically fall back on one of three interrelated *topoi*: They would argue, *first*, that Norwegian petroleum extraction was in fact “sustainable,” where “sustainability was operationalized to a question of reporting and of attempts to reduce the negative impacts on environment and climate” (Ihlen 2007: 29). While doing so, they would also render as cuts in emissions what were really cuts in the rate of emissions (Lind, cited in Ihlen 2007: 30). *Next*, they would argue that there were no realistic alternatives to petroleum, and that, since the world “needs energy,” the utility of oil and gas would in any case outweigh any negative impacts. *Finally*, they would argue that Norwegian petroleum industry had so diligently reduced pollution and waste from its facilities that its production was now, comparatively speaking, the “cleanest” in the world. Given this fact, it would make no sense for Norway to reduce its oil production, since it would only mean that other oil producing nations, with “dirtier” oil, would supply more of the world’s energy needs.

These arguments have not persuaded everyone – certainly not Norway’s environmentalists, who ironically complain that the Norwegian oil industry

suggests “it is practically doing the environment a favor with its oil extraction” (Ihlen 2007: 27). Ihlen insists that the oil industry’s rhetorical response strategies must nevertheless be seen as a success, as an apt rhetorical response to the situation, since they have in fact allowed Norwegian petroleum to develop further, in fact to whole new levels, while doing a fair job of retaining the industry’s reputation under pressure.

Arguably, though, a significant element of the success of this *topos* was the fact that it spread far beyond the industry, into the general political culture. Since the early 1990s, a long line of leading politicians has turned to this set of associations between Norwegian oil and environmental protection not just to *maintain* Norway’s oil production, but to justify what oil historian Helge Ryggvik calls “the historically extreme pace of extraction” that Norway turned to from the onset of the 1990s onwards (Ryggvik 2010: 94). It is perhaps significant that this long line of leading politicians includes former Prime Minister and originator of *Our Common Future*, Gro Harlem Brundtland, who argued, in 1990 (no more than three years after the publication of the Brundtland report), that “the traditional approach of insisting on equal national quantified targets was ‘antiquated’ and that a cost-effective policy internationally could mean that Norwegian emissions may increase if it leads to reductions in emissions elsewhere” (Hovden and Lindseth 2004: 69). Brundtland’s heir as party leader, and later Prime Minister, Jens Stoltenberg, not only embraced this view, but become its steadfast proponent, arguing – as did many others – that we needed to get as much environment as possible for each *kroner*, and that most of our climate obligations should consequently be met abroad. This association between oil and environment, then, can only work if the cost is borne *elsewhere* – a tendency that Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen argue is indicative of what they, tellingly, call “the imperial mode of living” (Brand and Wissen 2021).

Cost Accounting

I began this essay by stating that the display of riches always comes at a cost, but that the display can have its intended effect only if the costs are conveniently tucked away. (If the costs are *not* tucked away, it is no longer a display, but rather a cost-benefit analysis, or a *pro et contra* deliberation). What, then, were the costs of Norway’s ’92 pavilion?

The immediate costs of the pavilion as such were not particularly noteworthy. The costs of the *topos* that the pavilion was both motivated by and an expression of, however, were substantial – and not just at the time, but in the subsequent decades, up to today, where they have underwritten and exacerbated what economists call “negative externalities,” which refer to costs off-loaded onto a third party, i.e.

someone who was involved in neither the production nor the consumption of the commodity. The costs of Norwegian petroleum are demonstrably borne by a whole host of third parties: ecosystems, future generations, and the peoples of poor countries, to name but the most obvious. Today this seems obvious for an increasing number of us, but in fact, for decades, the Norwegian petroleum industry, elite politicians in leading political parties, as well as large parts of the population, persuaded others and themselves that quite the opposite was true – that Norwegian oil was “clean,” that to extract it was “sustainable,” and that it was in fact necessary to meet poor people’s “need for energy.”

Writing 10 years after Johan P. Olsen identified the petrolization of Norway, the historian Francis Sejersted – who, in 1999, had the benefit of seeing the petrolization process roll out – wrote about the “oil industrial complex” in Norway. He conceded that Olsen had been partly right, but suggested the picture needed certain modifications. What Sejersted thought he saw, at the end of the 1990s (here was another scholar lured into prophesizing the future), was that the oil age was not ending because of technological constraints like peak oil, but because of “public involvement,” that is, by a democratic tendency which was “based on increasing public attention around the frameworks under which the petroleum industry operates” (Sejersted 1999: 101). Sejersted took this not out of thin air but connected it to “new debates” around gas power plants, the tempo of extraction, and new oil fields.

Prophesizing the future is a dangerous sport, apparently, for Sejersted would turn out to be about as right as Olsen: There would indeed be political struggles over gas power plants – one government even had to step down because of it. Ultimately, however, nothing very dramatic would happen to rob either the industry or the political elites of their faith in the goodness of Norwegian petroleum, or, indeed, in the possibility of “mixing water and oil,” that is of being an environmental frontrunner and expansionist petroleum power at the same time. Indeed, as Sæther (2017) shows, since Sejersted prophesized growth of public involvement in 1999, Statoil (now Equinor) not only continued and refined the *topos* that Norwegian oil was clean and sustainable and good for the poor, they also did so while entering into tar sands (arguably not clean) and shale gas (certainly not sustainable), while doing business in a series of corrupt regimes (obviously not good for the poor). There has, in this period, also been public involvement, but on balance, the really impressive thing is that the petroleum industry and its many proponents in elite politics have managed to retain the Norwegian population’s trust in the myth.

If what commissioners, architects, politicians, and industrialists displayed at Norway’s Seville ’92 pavilion was an impressive feat of public relations, what Statoil/Equinor and its supporters have pulled off since that time is nothing short

of miraculous. I would like to say that, now, as an increasing number of exposés are written and the “climate generation” comes of age, we can finally expect “public involvement” to take place. Prophets tend to be wrong, however, so I had better not.

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¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, box 59b23/folder 4: Innstilling fra utenriks og konstitusjonskomiteen om Norges deltagelse ved Verdensutstillingen i Sevilla i 1992, st.prp. nr 127, 1988-89.

² 59b23/folder 8, internal memo.

³ “Notat til regjeringskonferanse,” 22/2-1988. MFA, 59b23/folder 1.

⁴ 59b23/folder 3, internal memo commenting on the proposition for Storting about Norway’s participation.

⁵ Letter from Norges tjenesteforbund, 23/11-1987. 59b23/folder 1.

⁶ 59b23/folder 1.

⁷ The dinner was co-organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Industry, and the Ministry of Trade, and the citations are from an unmarked internal memo that appears to have been circulated between these ministries in preparation of the dinner, in: 59b23/folder 3.

⁸ 59b23/folder 2: 8/12-1988, Ministry of Finance, «Verdsutstilling i Sevilla. Eventuell norsk deltaking». Ministry of Trade and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. «Norges mulige deltagelse på verdensutstillingen i Sevilla i 1992», 13/12-1988.

⁹ Embassy in Madrid, 29/10-1987.

¹⁰ “Notat til regjeringskonferanse,” 22/2-1988. MFA, 59b23/folder 1.

¹¹ 59b23/folder 3: Tilråding fra UD, utkast, St.prp. nr, «Norges deltakelse ved Verdensutstillingen i Sevilla 1992», April 1989.

¹² 59b23/folder 2: Note, 23/6-1988.

¹³ 59b23/folder 2: Note, 23/6-1988, from meeting in steering group in May.

¹⁴ 59b23/folder2: Norges eksportråd mailed the MFA on 4/10-1988.

¹⁵ 59b23/folder 2, letter 25 October.

¹⁶ 59b23/folder 9, 17/4-90.

¹⁷ 59b23/folder 2. Capital letters in original.

¹⁸ 59b23/folder 11. Letter 28 August 1990 and then 8 March 1991, from ambassador Freihow to Statoil director, Harald Norvik.

¹⁹ 59b23/folder 9. LPO, memo for discussion. 17/4-1990.

²⁰ 59b23/folder 23.

²¹ Formally, the brochure doubled as the Norwegian building authority's "completion report," but it was in fact a glossy publication, in three languages (Norwegian, English, and Spanish), which quite obviously was meant for promotional purposes.

²² <https://www.nbim.no/no/oljefondet/oljefondets-historie/>

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