Dear Mayor,

We write to you as architects, urbanists, researchers and authors, but most importantly, as concerned citizens. The architecture competition for the most important urban building project in Oslo in many decades, the Governmental Quarter (Regjeringskvartalet), recently announced its winners, and it is with great dismay that we see the urban implications of these responses to the competition brief.

The building of the new Governmental Quarter will be a pivotal development, not only for government employees working in the area, and for citizens of the city of Oslo, but also as a physical and symbolic manifestation of the democratic ideals central to Norwegian society – particularly the open relation between state and citizen. The redevelopment of the area has the great potential to reflect the national sentiments expressed by former prime minister Jens Stoltenberg’s statement issued soon after the attack in 2011: “Our answer with be more democracy, more humanity and more openness, but never naivety.” The current suggestions however, largely address only one of the four elements of that statement: how not to be naive concerning urban security.

In our research addressing the theme of urban security in recent years – and from our dialogue with a range of security professionals – we are acutely aware of the often conflicting logics and dilemmas of the ideals of the open city on the one hand, and the secure city on the other. We have seen the common securitized responses to infrequent and isolated events having considerable impact on the everyday spaces of cities. Just as the urbanist Michael Sorkin has pondered, "Walking the streets nowadays, with troops at the subway entrance, barricades around buildings, cameras staring from lamp-posts [...] it feels – more and more – like the battle for freedom is being lost.” We have followed how securitization leads to the increasing isolation and disconnection of buildings, spaces and neighbourhoods from the city they are supposedly a part of – whether embassy complexes, federal buildings or office parks. And this process has not necessarily resulted in these sites being more secure. At the same time, we have observed how these often monofunctional and securitized sites have become effective dead zones in cities.

In the context of the site of the government quarter, where the state meets its citizens, we see this urban fragmentation, the restriction of functions and access to this area of the city, as particularly problematic.

We interpret the current securitization-focused brief for the government quarter, and the corresponding proposals, as symptomatic of the ongoing international infringements on the spatial conditions of the open city, and of the ‘right to the city’ of citizens. These latter notions do not represent some kind of radical or marginal ideal, but in fact constitute what many theorists understand to be key spatial prerequisites for a living democracy.
In these terms, the notion of the right to the city defines the right for all groups and citizens to be involved in the process of developing themselves, the society, and the city in general. Our cities must support us in enjoying all aspects of urban life, and enable us to exercise our rights as citizens to participate in free speech, debate and public assembly. Concerns such as these, and general concerns for the living character of the spaces of city of Oslo have clearly held a diminished importance compared to the theme of security in the case of the government quarter brief.

We are deeply concerned by the opacity with which this brief was developed – particularly the overriding security component – based on decisions made within a limited circle (Statsbygg and Forsvarsbygg) without public discourse or involvement of other informed security experts, architects or planners. We strongly question the appropriateness of the military and defensive thinking being applied to a civilian urban area – unless we as citizens want our cities to become securitized fortresses. Unfortunately, the rules of the competition did not allow for participants to discuss, question, or reinterpret the particular security framework of the brief without instant disqualification.

Based on these concerns, our demand to the City of Oslo is that the premise of the brief be reevaluated by a wider group of informed experts and citizens, and opened to further public debate in order to ensure that the new Government Quarter becomes an integrated and coherent part of the living, open and democratic city of Oslo – one that fosters a strong relationship between the state and its citizenry. If not, the Government Quarter development on its current trajectory risks becoming a monument of momentary blindness toward the city’s capacity to foster and embody democracy, openness and humanity – in the name of security. The government quarter is likely to become an empty and disused fragment of Oslo, devoid of life, bypassed by its citizens, and not necessarily any more secure.

Signed:

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Authors: The City Between Freedom and Security: Contested Public Spaces in the 21st Century