

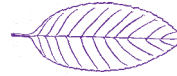
ENCOUNTERING A STRANGE PLACE



Byverksted zine #37

ESSO—PARK! Imaginary
Excavations





Encountering a Strange Place *Imaginary Excavations*

On the edge of Kvalaberg, south of Hillevågsvatnet, squeezed between the railroad and the fjord, lies *“a strange place, which is a little difficult to make sense of”*¹

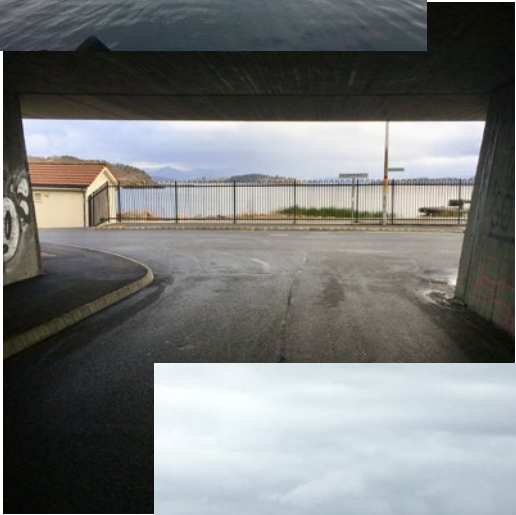
Remains of shattered concrete structures.
Colonies of woodlice. A swan family.

Metal rods stick out from the ground. A multitude of plants are growing over the bases of former fuel tanks.

Four languages are used on a yellow sign to caution against fishing—fishermen are standing on the pier nonetheless, minding their own business.



¹ Byantropologene and MakersHub. 2023. *Sluttrapport: Funn fra nabomedvirkning i forbindelse med plan 2731: Naboer i Køhlers vei om naboskap, tilgang til sjøen og grøntområder*. Byantropologene, MakersHub, Pådriv and Stavanger kommune. p. 16



This area is commonly referred to as “*Esso-tomt*” (Esso lot) by locals and in official documents.

Hamnevik is the southern extension, where the Hillevåg boat club is located. Despite its name, the ‘harbour bay’ has never served as a harbour.

After decades of abandonment, the plan is to turn this former oil depot into “*Hamnevik friområde*” (Hamnevik outdoor area): “*the meeting place between luxury apartments in Paradis and older industry*”²

The name “*Esso*” is being removed, along with the contaminated soil, and the concrete rubble that has been deemed obsolete.



↪ From the municipal announcement for the first public hearing of the zoning plan for Esso-tomten, in Stavanger Aftenblad (2010). [«Plan 2254 Reguleringsplan for Esso-tomten på Kvalaberg, felt H45 i gjeldende kommunedelplan for Hillevåg Paradis. Hillevåg bydel.»]

2 Stavanger Aftenblad, 23 April 2021

WHAT ELSE IS AT RISK OF GETTING LOST IN THE PROCESS?

As part of the planning process for developing Hillevåg, Stavanger Municipality has gathered residents to share their opinions and thoughts concerning ‘*Esso-tomten*’.

We believe this ‘*strange place*’ still holds many more stories. We want them to be listened to.

Our proposal *Esso-Park!*³ invites everyone (in)to an imaginary excavation: We encourage you to explore, dream up and remember alternative histories and futures of this site.

This could be a temporary intervention, a collaborative exploration, neighbourhood activity, action research and relational art practice.

Or something else altogether.

3 The working title *Esso-Park!* is also an expression of gratitude to two participatory projects in Hamburg, which have been significant sources of inspiration for this project, and Byverket in general: *Esso-Häuser* and *Park Fiction* (subsequently *PlanBude*, and later *Hafenkante*). There is a lot to learn from their experiences. We see the projects as examples for successful participation, citizen involvement and grassroots activism. → park-fiction.net/park-fiction-introduction-in-english

PRE-DATING THE NORWEGIAN 'OIL FAIRY TALE'

The «*Esso-tomt*» represents Stavanger's early modern history: an early (if not the first!) depot for paraffin and oil imports in the region, built in 1911.⁴

One of the oldest examples for oil infrastructure in the Stavanger region, it dates back long before the 'discoveries' in the North Sea that led to the so-called Norwegian 'oil adventure/fairy tale' (oljeeventyret).⁵

Hillevåg may well have been among the first places where oil arrived in Stavanger. Even if at the time, it was about storage and distribution.

4 Esso is a brand by the US American company ExxonMobil. The entry at Arkivverket on the history of ExxonMobil counts the facilities in Hillevåg as one of the earliest examples of the company's infrastructure in Norway (*Kulimportkaien* next to the Esso-tomt was established eight years later, in 1919). ExxonMobil is the world's largest non-state-owned oil and gas company, and the individual company that has contributed the largest share of CO₂ emissions since the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015, and a total share of 2,79% of global greenhouse gas emissions between 1884 and 2024.

→ carbonmajors.org

5 In 1965, Esso Exploration Norway Inc. was awarded the first licenses on the Norwegian continental shelf and became the first company to begin exploration drilling in 1966. In 1967, the company made the first discovery on the Norwegian continental shelf, although the find was not considered commercially viable at the time.

«Tank facilities and storage Hillevåg — Stavanger w/ 800 cubic metres petroleum tank. The horses Odin and Svithun. 1950: The railroad way is now underpass 200 m to the North. The horse stable is now a garage – the hay barn is the manager's residence – boat house and storage shed are gone, but the depots remain unchanged». ↴



From the Norwegian National Archives.

Unknown photographer and year.

Sharing Licence: CC BY. Original image: digitalarkivet.no

→ nasjonalarkivet.no/exxonmobil-125-ar/#tankanlegg

SIGNIFICANCE AS ABANDONED INFRASTRUCTURE

The depot expanded to ~15 tanks by the 1970s. By 1987, Esso had dismantled their facilities. Because of suspected pollution, the site remained fenced in for many decades — long enough for memory to fade, mystery to emerge and for ruderal ecologies⁶ to grow from the contaminated soil.

In 2022, artists Maiken Stene and Hans-Edward Hammonds were acting as guardians of the site through their relational art project *Paradise Rangers*. For them, the value of this area lay in the fact that it has remained rather undeveloped, a rare occurrence in Stavanger:

“Various species have found roots here, and the indigenous population has found spaces where they thrive and established various places for gathering in harmony with the landscape itself. The forms of life that have found their

place here are unique, and fully adapted to the site’s conditions, weather, minerals, characteristics and microclimate.”⁷

And they pleaded: *“By finding ways to respect and protect the ‘urban wilderness’ in the cities, it will help us to respect nature in other places, too.”⁸*



It was not until September 2019, following remediation efforts, that the area was partially reopened to the public. After buying the lot from Esso, the state-owned developer Bane NOR Eiendom installed a gym area on the western edge of the site. An interim park solution for the nearby residential development project *Paradis Sør*. An article in Aftenbladet at the time described the Esso-tomt as getting a “new life”.⁹

What if these interventions rather were private developers’ attempts at controlling this hitherto neglected space—and the unruly traces of oil in it?

⁶ Ruderal ecologies refer to ecologies emerging spontaneously from degraded environments (e.g. alongside train tracks or roads, wastelands, or rubble). Insurgent life in the aftermath of war and industrial activity. Zones where networks of people, plants, nonhuman animals and objects can remake the urban fabric (see also Stoetzer 2018).

⁷ Paradise Rangers, 2020–2022 → paradiserrangers.com

⁸ → contemporaryartstavanger.no/archive/intervju-med-paradise-rangers

⁹ Stavanger Aftenblad, 13 September 2021



LIVING WITH THE LEGACIES OF OIL

A post-industrial atmosphere lingers, with weathered fill materials, asphalt and concrete rubble left behind from clean-up, rusted metal rods and eroding pipelines.

Esso's grip on this site long extends beyond the closing down of operations in the late 1980s and decontamination some thirty years later. The company still remains part of the site's identity, most prominently in its name.
— Whether developers like it or not.

The meanings of *'Esso-tomten'* keep shifting. Urban planners, neighbours, site users, private developers have always remade them. As have the fjord, the weather and the presence of oil.

What sense will you make of it?
What meaning will you find?

What might this place still teach us
about living with this oil-fueled past?



EXPLORING ESSO-PARK!

Esso-Park! is an open invitation:

To form new relationships with this place
before it becomes *'Hamnevika friområde'*.

To reframe public conversations. To turn
our attention to what is often overlooked.

Between 14th–20th September 2026, *Esso-Park!*
will experiment with temporary platforms
for collective reflection around the site's many
stories: abandonment, conquest, appropriation,
reclamation, care, renewal.

How we will be gathering can take many forms:
observing, listening, sharing food, resting,
sketching, walking. It is up to you.

See you in September!

Sirrah Hamann, Benjamin Hickethier, Byverksted

Please get in touch if you are interested:
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