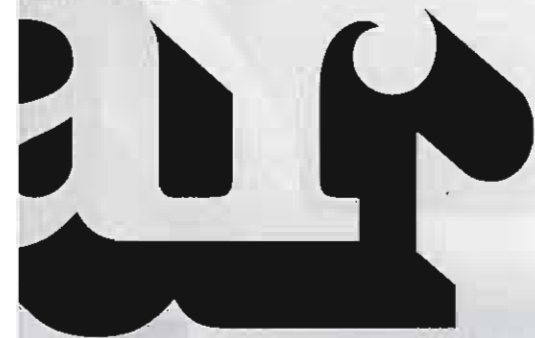
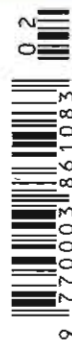


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VARDØ, NORWAY

A proposal to regenerate a remote Norwegian town on the Barents Sea predicts a sustainable future built on both oil and ecology

CATHERINE SLESSOR

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Above_ Buildings
for cultural
activities form
the initial
vanguard, sowing
seeds for future
development

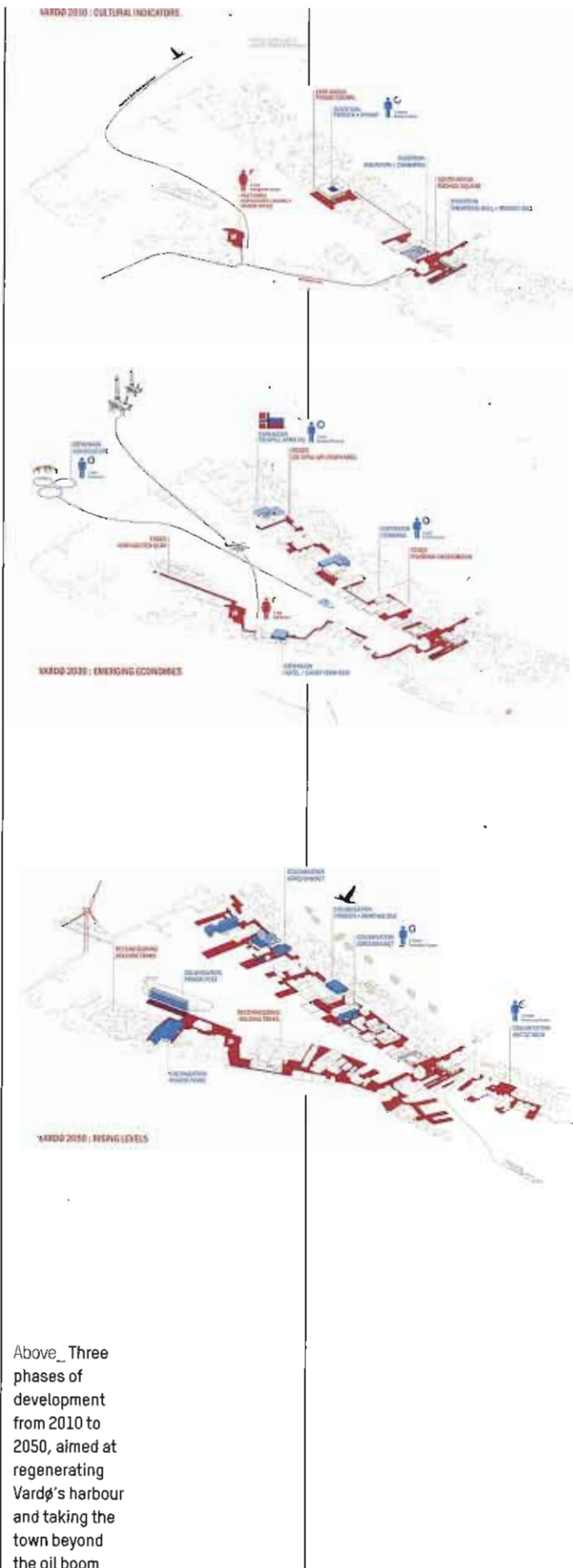
Isolated on the roof of the world, on that part of north-eastern Norway that curves round Sweden to meet Finland and Russia, Vardø is a rugged and remote Norwegian port town on the Barents Sea.

Historically, it was a prosperous trading centre with strong links to neighbouring Russia, but the fishing industry, for years a staple of the economy, is now on the wane and the town suffers the familiar modern problems of decline and depopulation.

The harbour front, formerly at the heart of Vardø's economic and civic life, is now a sad succession of vacant industrial sheds and unmoored docks. Plunged into Arctic winter darkness for two months each year, the town struggles against a harsh, depressive climate.

Yet its heraldic motto, 'cedant tenebrae soli' (darkness shall give way to the sun), crystallises a dogged, if perhaps unintentionally ironic, Nordic optimism. And for the hardy and intrepid, Vardø has its charms: a bleak but beautiful landscape, beguiling vernacular architecture, abundant birdlife, a cautiously expanding tourist industry and a sheltered port that does not freeze in winter thanks to the benign effect of the North Atlantic drift.

Vardø was one of 62 sites for the 10th iteration of European – the biannual pan-European forum for investigating and implementing new ideas about urban design and development – which ran in 2009. Proposals are restricted to architects under 40, so the programme aims to channel youthful(ish) enthusiasm and brio in the quest to address often challenging sites and contexts. The 2009 theme was 'Inventing urbanity: regeneration, revitalisation, colonisation', and Vardø was one of three Norwegian locales —



Above_ Three phases of development from 2010 to 2050, aimed at regenerating Vardø's harbour and taking the town beyond the oil boom

(the others were Oslo and Trondheim). Not surprisingly, it was by far the most isolated and northerly site in the entire European programme.

'Repositioning the Remote' – the winning proposal for Vardø by London-based Langdon Reis Architects, with Kelly Doran and Louis Hall – aims to redefine Vardø's historic relationship with the Barents Sea, a relationship that has continuously evolved in response to changing economic and political conditions. 'Geographically, Vardø's unique location has constantly been reframed to adapt to these changes,' says director Ross Langdon. 'As this frame shifts further north towards receding ice sheets, Arctic shipping lanes, offshore oil fields and ecological transformation, Vardø is poised to redefine its relationship to the Barents once more.'

Langdon Reis proposes three strategies for short, mid and long-term development. In the short term, new cultural buildings and spaces will replace or colonise existing abandoned industrial structures with the aim of kick-starting civic life, boosting the local economy and attracting interest from outside. These spaces, each with a distinct set of uses, will be the seeds of future development of the harbour, and will begin to regenerate the town's relationship with the Barents Sea.

By 2030, the team predicts that Norwegian oil and gas production will be concentrated on reserves in the Barents Sea (though such development has been politically controversial). Vardø's proximity to such reserves makes it the obvious choice for a harbour base to service the industry, but the team is mindful of the need to protect the region's fragile

ecology. 'The inherent conflict between offshore oil production and ecological preservation could yield a diverse set of economic and architectural opportunities that would convert oil revenues into a framework for a post-oil paradigm,' says Langdon. **Oil exploration monitoring and servicing operations currently operating out of Vardø would need to expand their operations, requiring new harbour buildings. But Vardø is uniquely positioned to develop as an Arctic outpost of ornithology and marine biology.**

Vardø's long-term future depends on a set of levels: oil and energy production, rising seas and temperatures, aquacultural development and, ultimately, a high level of self-sufficiency given its geography. Norway's post-oil economy will need to establish alternative, localised and diversified means of producing energy and food to maintain the qualities of remote urban life previously sustained through oil production and transport. Power from offshore Arctic winds could meet local requirements, with the surplus pumped into the European grid. The harbour could be reconfigured in response to rising sea levels, and fish and crab could be farmed.

'Beyond the oil horizon, Vardø must create new means of production, and exploit the harbour as the centre of a post-carbon economy,' says Langdon. 'By 2050, its future will hinge on revitalising existing industrial structures with a cultural programme, regenerating the water's edge through marine infrastructures and colonising interstitial spaces with new modes of ecological production, so that the harbour will again become the centre of public and private life.'