

Scandinavian Prison:
DIGNITY, REHABILITATION, AND
SOCIAL JUSTICE
XL

DATE
1960s - 1970s CE

LOCATION
HALDEN, NORWAY
(and Sweden)

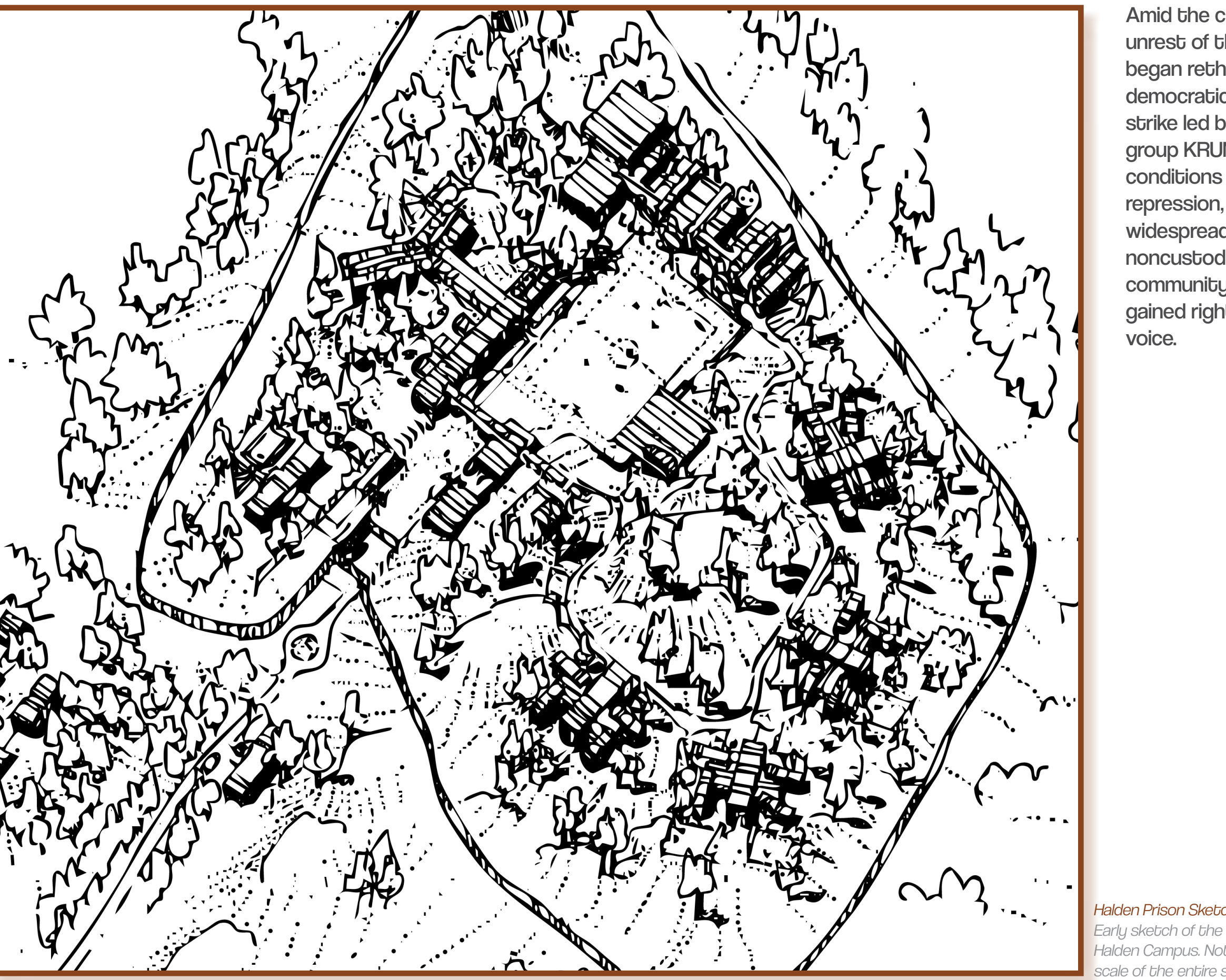
SYSTEM
EDUCATION-CENTERED JUSTICE
SPACIAL LOGIC
COMMUNAL DESIGN



Modern Aerial View
A contemporary image of the site, now in ruin, revealing how the structure still holds the memory of its carceral past.

WHY IT MATTERS

Eastern State became one of the most copied and most critiqued prisons in history. Its design brought solitary confinement into architectural form, turning every brick into a tool of discipline. For over a century, the building reflected the tension between reform and control—promising inner transformation through silence, but often delivering psychological collapse. Its ruins remain a reminder that architecture once sought to shape not just the prisoner, but the soul.



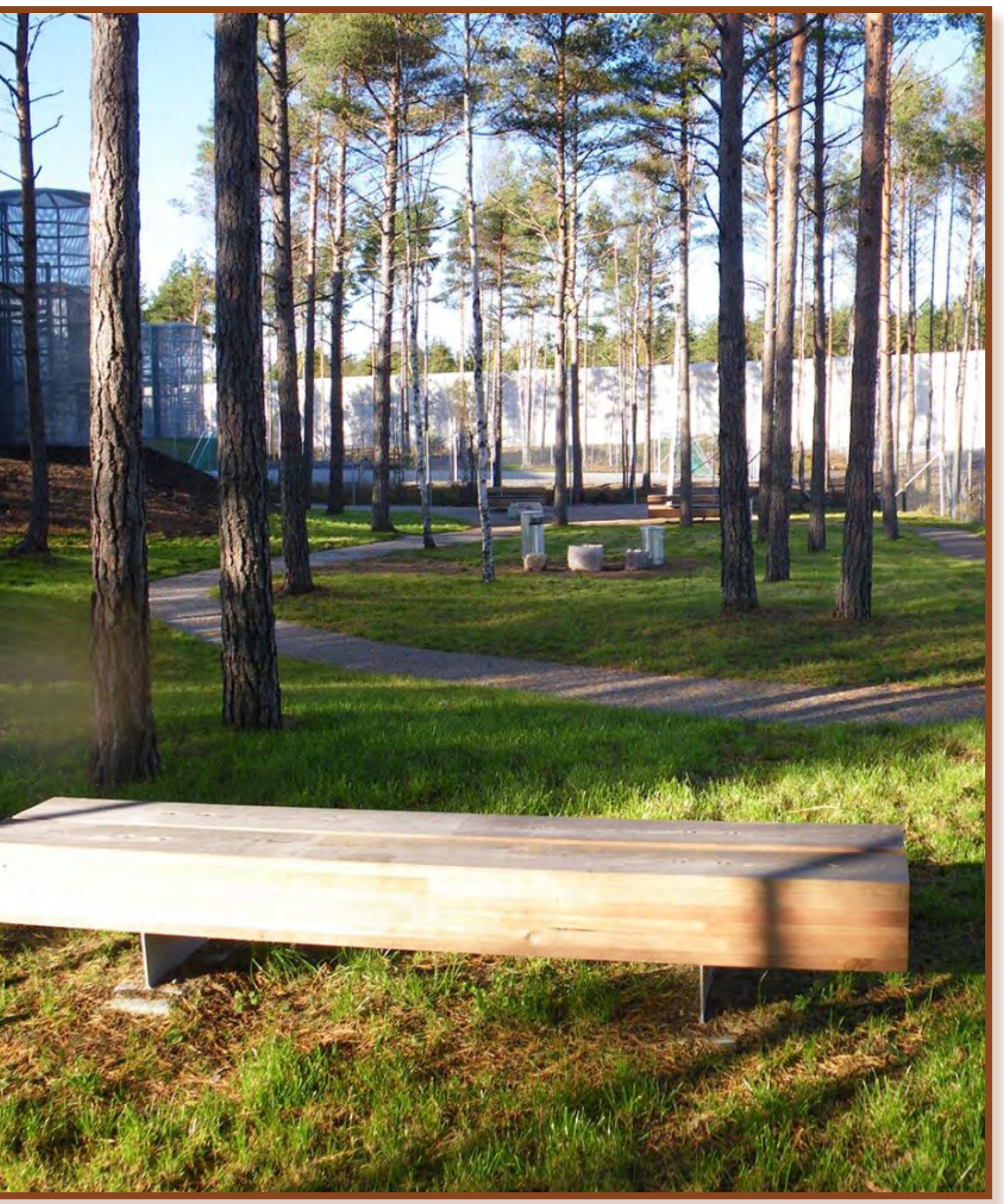
Halden Prison Sketch
Early sketch of the entire Halden Campus. Note the scale of the entire site.

Amid the civil rights movements and political unrest of the 1960s, Scandinavian countries began rethinking the role of punishment in democratic society. In Sweden, a 1970 prison strike led by inmates and supported by the group KRUM brought public attention to conditions inside. Rather than respond with repression, the government implemented widespread reform; new laws expanded noncustodial options like probation and community service, and incarcerated people gained rights to education, work, and political voice.



Halden Prison Shared Kitchen
An annotated architectural diagram showing the full layout of the prison, including cells, circulation, and guard control zones.

Norway followed a similar path but centered its reform on architectural transformation. Prisons were redesigned with domestic qualities: open kitchens, communal spaces, and contact with nature. Bars and surveillance were replaced by privacy and responsibility. The model emphasized trust between staff and prisoners, supported by national investment in education and reentry programs. Halden Prison, which opened in 2010 but was rooted in these earlier reforms, became the physical expression of this ideology. Designed by Erik Møller Architects and HLM, it includes private rooms, creative workshops, and outdoor recreation fields; inmates live in shared housing, cook together, and follow structured but autonomous routines.



Exterior Image Of Bench
The landscape design is based on the natural features of the terrain.

This Scandinavian approach resulted in some of the lowest recidivism rates in the world. But more than the numbers, it shifted how incarceration is perceived. Rather than punishing people for who they were, the system helps them become someone else. These prisons are not just buildings; they are social contracts made visible in architecture.

Interior Hallway Image
Materials are selected to change according to light and weather conditions, giving a sense of the passing of time.

