Romantic landscape painters of the nineteenth century believed nature to be the sole source of beauty, and searched for dramatic geographic formations fitting for their pictures. Some landscape painters, like Norwegian Joseph Christian Dahl (1788-1857), were early promoters of landscape preservation, believing such “picturesque” landscapes needed protection from rapacious human activity such as logging, urban development, and even archeological digs.

Harry Fett (1875-1962) modernized the Norwegian intellectual tradition of landscape preservation, successfully proving its cultural value and its feasibility in practice. He also extended it conceptually to urban areas, from landscapes to townscapes as it were, arguing for the need to expand the purview of preservation from individual monuments to entire neighborhoods with distinct historic character. Upon graduating high school, Fett went on a four-year study tour of Germany and Italy where he became fascinated by preservation. Upon his return in 1898, he became secretary for the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Norwegian Monuments, extensively documenting medieval Norwegian church art. When the Norwegian Folk Museum opened in 1901, he was named keeper of antiquities. Fett’s thinking about landscape and urban preservation was shaped by his experiences at the Folk Museum, an open-air collection of buildings moved to Oslo from around the country, which was modeled after Stockholm’s Skansen and included costumed interpreters. The museum was a key symbol in the nationalist quest for independence from Sweden—eventually gained peacefully in 1905. Fett earned a Ph.D. in Art History in 1908, and was appointed head of the Norwegian Directorate for Cultural Heritage, or National Antiquarian, in 1913, a position he held until 1946. He advanced his theories in practice, preserving landscapes and urban ensembles in highly visible preservation campaigns, such as Bergen’s Bryggen Hanseatic wharf, and Røros, a 17th century mining town with its associated farming landscape. Throughout his career, He remained in friendly dialogue with his Scandinavian counterparts, especially Sigurd Curman, Sweden’s National Antiquarian. Together with colleagues in Denmark and Sweden, Fett advanced the idea to preserve urban and rural environments into groundbreaking legislation.

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