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NORWAY

Working in Bodø gave us the opportunity to be the kind of architect we aspire to be, says **Daniel Rosbottom** of DRDH Architects.

Norway appeared on our horizon in 2008, when we won an open competition for a cultural masterplan in Bodø, north Norway's second city. This defined the location of two principal buildings, a library and a concert hall and theatre.

That success pre-qualified us onto invited competitions for each building, which we also won. The innovative two-stage procedure allowed us, as a small practice, to compete against established offices while offering the client a more certain outcome than a purely open process. It gave us the opportunity to achieve our ambition of constructing large-scale public projects – an ever more distant aim for young UK practices, perpetually held back by the dead hand of pre-qualification.

The buildings are testament to the central role culture plays in Scandinavian life. The short-lived emphasis on regional investment in Britain over the last decade feels fleeting when compared to Norway's history of exemplary cultural buildings, often serving small communities. Such circumstances offer intriguing design challenges and in our case led us, with Arup, to develop an innovative auditorium that transforms from versatile theatre to symphonic hall.

Counter to the objectification of many contemporary public buildings, our project draws upon the Scandinavian tradition of civic modernity. The buildings share a familial character. Their stacked precast concrete facades contain an aggregate of local white Fauske marble. Remembering more ancient architecture, they recall Christian Norberg-Shulz's reflections upon the importance of whiteness in a land of dark winters and long summers. The clustered ensemble of forms responds to surrounding buildings and urban spaces, drawing them into a larger order that redefines relationships between the city and landscape.

That such an approach succeeded against more demonstrative competition testifies to the care and seriousness of the selection procedure. While such projects are not subject to the complex community consultation one might expect in Britain, the open nature of Norwegian local government leads to extensive deliberation and a close level of public and political scrutiny at each stage.

Our architecture is concerned with making and we were instinctively resistant to the de facto relationship with an executive architect to deliver the project. We employ Oslo-based Dark Architects to assist us but Norway's adoption of European and British Standards, coupled with an ability to work in English, has afforded us the opportunity to undertake the detailed design and tender information ourselves, and we will retain an on-site role throughout construction.

This responsibility was hard won, but our understanding of the necessary quality and scope of information has translated well, resulting in further contracts for interiors, furniture and signage. These offer a potential for holistic design that feels rare on such projects.

Challenges have been huge, exacerbated by inevitable cultural differences in terms of process and procurement. Economic discipline has been a central concern and it has been daunting to be held responsible for one's own costs and to proactively manage these in relation to other consultants. The role of quantity surveyor does not exist in Norway and, surprisingly, one misses them. The project has also been procured using Building Information Modelling (BIM), a requirement for all Norwegian governmental contracts. This steep learning curve did not offer the panacea the industry might imagine. Nonetheless we trust the experience will stand us in good stead.

Working in Norway offers us the opportunity to be the kind of architects we aspire to be and the welcome we have received from some of its most talented architects is heart-warming. Now a registered Norwegian practice, we hope to build on the firm foundations we have laid in Bodø.

Daniel Rosbottom is a principal in DRDH Architects, and head of school at Kingston.





Above *View from the harbour; concert hall (left) and library entrances.*
Left *Interiors of library and concert hall.*