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Theatres
True North: DRDH in Bodø

Forum
Piers Taylor, Robert Sakula, Timothy Brittain-Catlin, Paul Clarke, Hana Loftus

Works
Assemble, Gehry Partners, Haworth Tompkins, Studio Octopi, Grimshaw

Focus
Envelope: Abell Nepp, FCB Studios, Hassell and Richard Kirk Architect

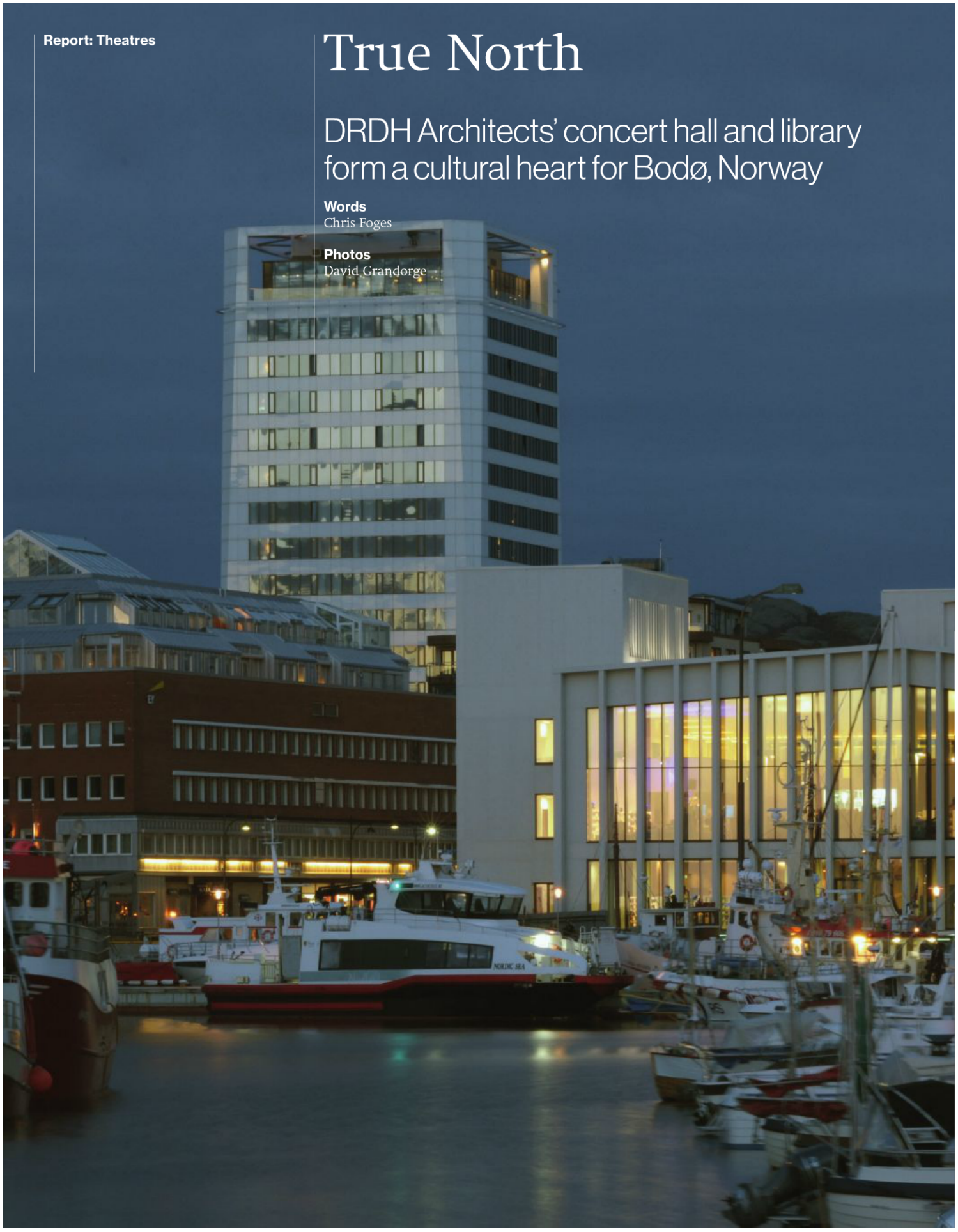


True North

DRDH Architects' concert hall and library form a cultural heart for Bodø, Norway

Words
Chris Foges

Photos
David Grandorge



Below
The two buildings sit on the last two empty urban blocks in the city centre, facing the harbour and terminating Bodø's high street, Storgata. The overall project budget for the 17,500 sqm complex was £110m.

It's the opening night of the Stormen concert hall and library in Bodø, northern Norway. Speeches have been given and a concert played to a packed house. In the hotel opposite, word goes round that the Northern Lights are making an appearance in the winter skies above the buildings' irregular roofscape, and their architects, Daniel Rosbottom and David Howarth of London-based DRDH, dash out for a look. Remarkably, neither has seen the aurora before though it's a common enough sight here, 100 kilometres north of the Arctic Circle, and they have been regular visitors to Bodø since winning an open competition for a cultural quarter masterplan six years ago, and an invited competition for the two buildings shortly thereafter.

Other competition entries took direct inspiration from the jagged snow-streaked mountains that form the coastal city's inland backdrop, and placed peculiar forms in splendid isolation on the water's edge. DRDH's complex scheme was selected "because it worked", says Rosbottom, and because it addressed both the city and the sea. Bodø was largely flattened by the Luftwaffe in 1940 but its reconstruction is all but complete and, unusually for a city of the far north, its 50,000-strong population is growing, buoyed by the arrival of new industries: conventions, education, aviation.

Situated on the last two undeveloped blocks in the city centre, Stormen's two freestanding buildings are carefully tuned to bolster surrounding streets, create new public spaces and bridge the gap between a retail area and Bodø's working harbour, where a harpoon-toting whaler nestles among the yachts.







Site plan key

1 library

2 concert hall

3 Storgata









The library sits on the western edge of the harbour, and its principal facade faces the water. The larger concert hall, immediately behind, flanks the end of Storgata, an important shopping street. They are separated by the final stretch of the main road into town, but from the waterside appear as a single entity, a 'hill of gable ends' as the architects put it. Both are faced with loadbearing panels of white precast concrete, part-polished to a dull gleam as though scoured by the wind that whips off the sea, or perhaps bleached by the midnight sun of the Arctic summer.

Among the architects' primary concerns were questions of appropriateness: how to make a building with a presence and scale befitting the city's cultural heart while avoiding any suggestion of 'elitism'; how to create an ensemble with its own independent identity that could still "talk to its neighbours and be friendly".

Small inflections in the two principal facades adjust them to the irregular building lines of Storgata and the harbour front, as well as enhancing oblique views of their loosely classical columnar brise-soleils. Shallow pitched roofs to both buildings pick up on the heights of immediate neighbours, the profiles of industrial sheds across the water and the rocky landscape itself. To mitigate its bulk, the concert hall's flytower is positioned in the middle of the plan, surrounded by an ensemble of shorter towers containing plant and lift overruns which act as accents in the streetscape. Corners of both buildings are cut away to form sheltered external spaces. Though the concert hall and library are unmistakably related, each has a distinct — almost antithetical — identity that is revealed inside.

Key

1 second hall

2 amplified music venue

3 foyer

4 bar

5 main hall

6 artist area

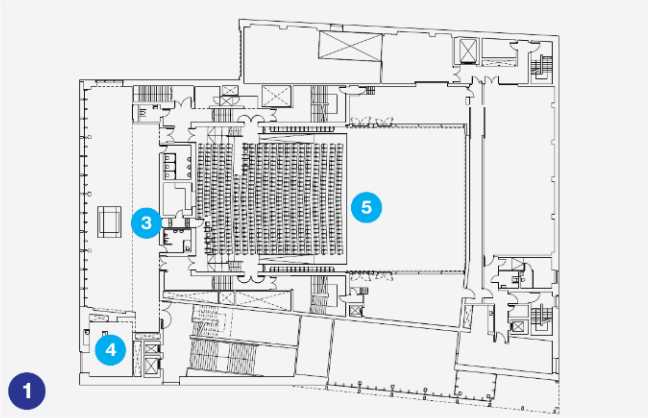
7 office

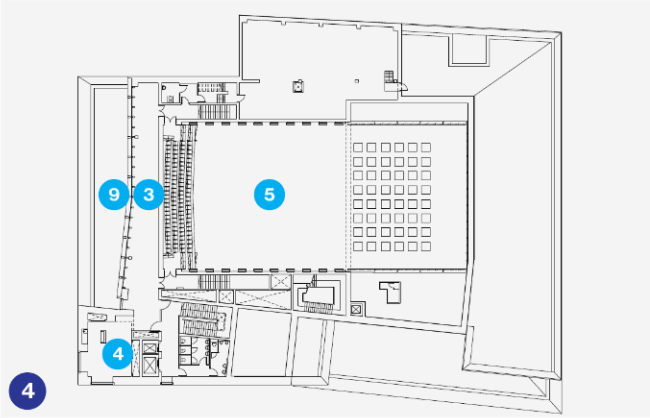
8 recital room

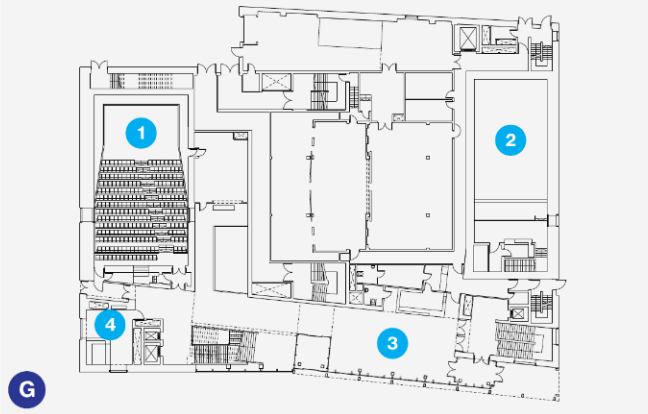
9 terrace

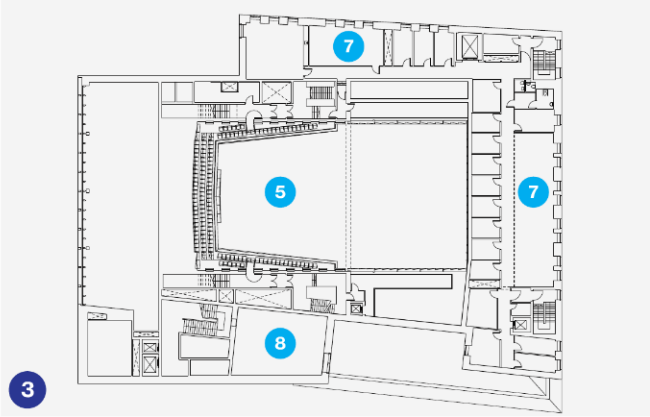
Below
Concert hall plans and section. The principal volumes of stage, flytower and the 944-seat main auditorium occupy the centre of the plan, and are wrapped by two 'L's of accommodation. Public spaces to the south and west — foyer, circulation — adjoin the city's principal streets while administrative and backstage areas are placed against secondary streets.

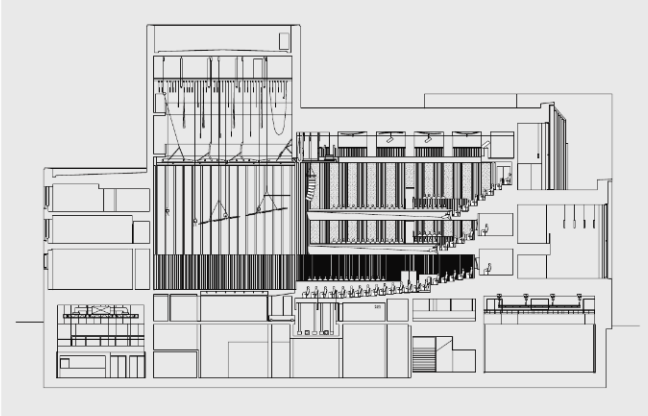
The main hall and two smaller subterranean performance spaces (a 260-seat multipurpose auditorium and a 460-capacity amplified music venue) are separated by acoustically isolated walls and non-contiguous structure. An 80-seat recital room is on the third floor.

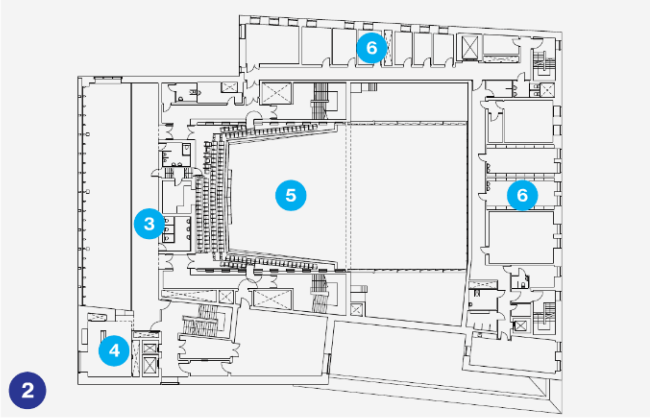












Below
Processional stair, upper-level foyer and main auditorium in the concert hall. A typologically radical solution developed by DRDH and Arup allows the main auditorium, or 'Store Sal', to accommodate both acoustic symphonic programmes, amplified live music and theatrical performance: 14-metre-high wall panels are moved on ceiling tracks and 18-metre wide ceiling panels are rotated and lifted away to transform the concert hall into a full proscenium theatre. Adjustable acoustic panels to the walls alter reverberation times. A moveable bridge provides flexible lighting positions.

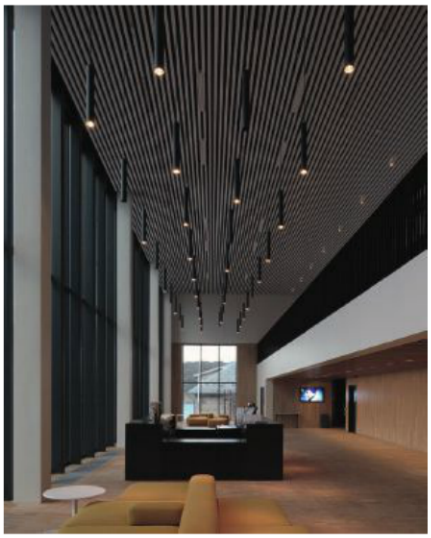
The timber lining was largely prefabricated in Barcelona, and the seats manufactured in Italy. A bespoke fabric was commissioned for seat covers and the stage curtain.

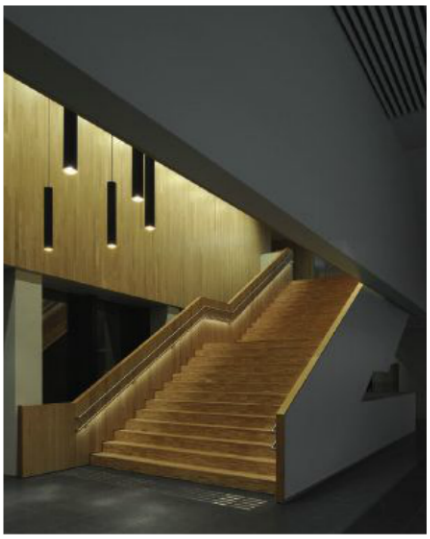
As a 'daytime' building, the library is planned around views in and out. Ground-floor public rooms including a gallery and cafe give glimpses of the activity within to passers-by, and floor-to-ceiling glazing offers a cinematic prospect of water and weather from the double-height reading room on the first floor. It is organised as an open, expansive 'modernist interior landscape' on three floors under a lofty tent-like roof, with a long stair rising through an atrium that allows visual connections through the whole height and depth of the building.

In the concert hall, front- and back-of-house areas are tighter, and wrap around the central main auditorium in a pair of 'L's. Visitors' progress from the main entrance in a loggia on Storgata to their seats in each of the four auditoria takes them through a rich sequence of idiosyncratic spaces. In the foyer itself, variations in ceiling height and changes of material suggest a series of adjoining rooms.

In the upper level bars and foyers, windows are carefully positioned to bring points of interest — from a neighbour's attic storey to the far horizon — into visitors' peripheral experience, subtly establishing connections with the wider environment.

Internal finishes are from a shared palette of inexpensive engineered materials whose fabricated quality is made explicit in the detailing. Oak-faced ply lines the auditoria and grand stairs. Cafe counters and bars are made from high-pressure laminate. Calcium sulphate board does a fair imitation of concrete on the concert hall's foyer walls and balcony fronts. Rich colours drawn from traditional Norwegian houses identify each of four bars in the concert hall, and are found again in bespoke furniture in the children's library.



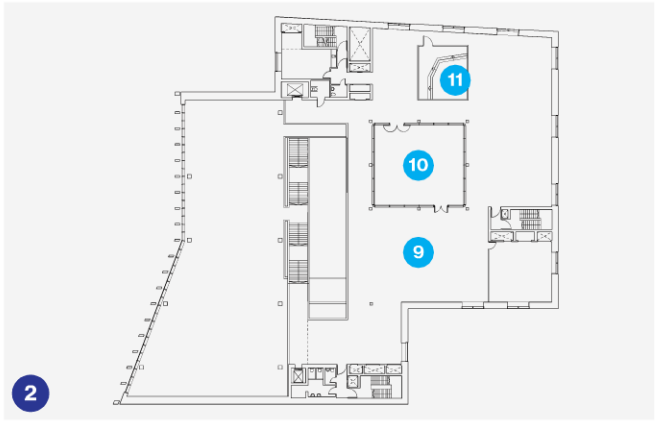


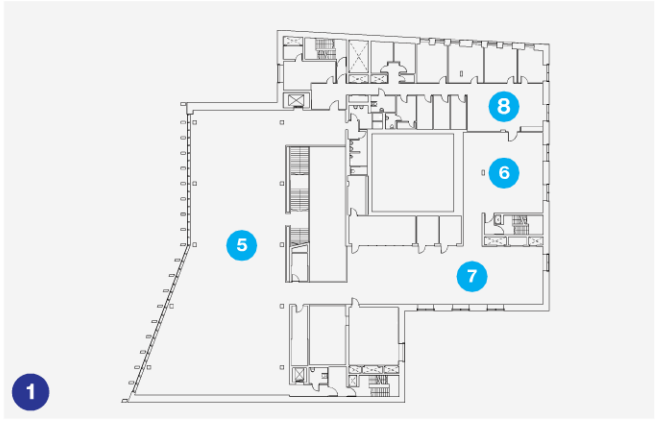


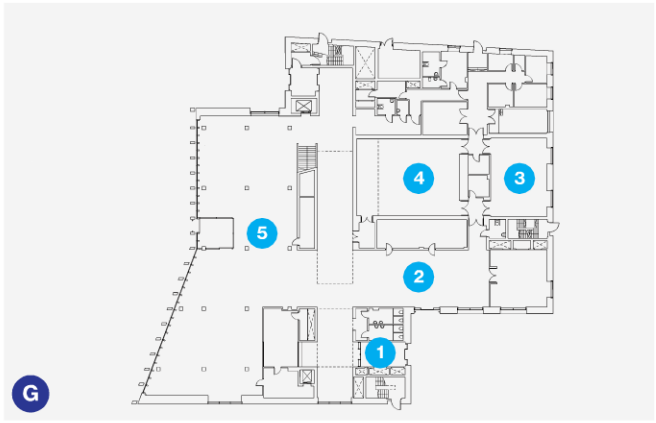
Particular care was expended on the detail of the 944-seat main auditorium to achieve the necessary acoustic performance for a full symphonic hall “while keeping control of the architecture”, says Rosbottom. Large wall and ceiling panels can be adjusted or removed to alter the reverberation time, making it one of the few halls in the world that can fully transform from concert mode to a proscenium theatre without losing the acoustic performance of either, says Arup project director Ian Knowles.

With high expectations of what Bodø’s first major public buildings could accommodate, other spaces also have to work hard. “We were trying to think if there are any rooms that only do one thing”, says project coordinator Jillian Jones, “and concluded that there are: the toilets”. Rosbottom is quick to point out that the buildings were not designed to be ‘flexible’ in the conventional sense (“it’s a dangerous thing for architecture”), but a certain indeterminacy is one of the project’s strengths: appearance and associations seem to shift with the angle of view; the buildings are by turn heavy and delicate, abstract and figurative, spare and richly textured.









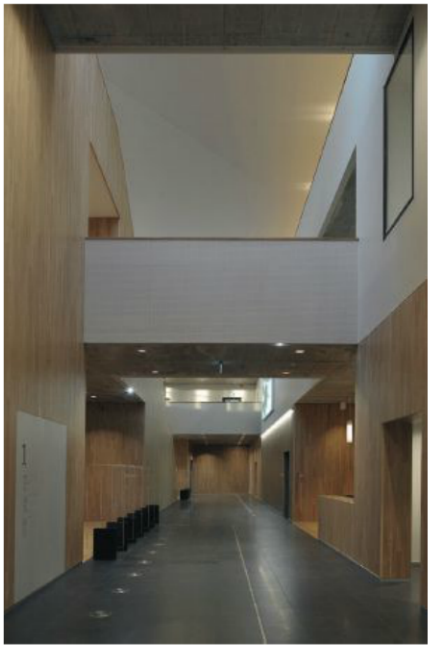
Key

1 foyer
2 cafe
3 gallery
4 community studio
5 adult library
6 youth library
7 media library
8 offices
9 children’s library
10 courtyard
11 story-telling pod

Right
Ground, first and second floor plans of the library, whose organisation places active public spaces — including a gallery and cafe — next to principal streets. The plan is indented at two corners to form part-sheltered external public spaces inviting use. An internal ‘street’ running perpendicular to Bodø’s high street (Storgata) is spanned by bridges linking libraries for children, youth and adults on the floors above.

Right, below
At first-floor level, floor-to-ceiling glazing in the library's double-height main space offers a view of the harbour. A generous oak-lined stair climbs through three storeys along the length of the internal street. A rooflight at the top provides a visual connection with the thirteenth-floor bar in an adjacent hotel.







Walking the site with the architects, the depth of thought that underpins the project becomes apparent in the references that tumble out at every stop, from Christian Norberg-Schulz's appreciation of the way white buildings hold the Norwegian sun to Aldo Rossi's writing on monuments and memory. Both DRDH partners teach — Howarth is a visiting professor at Northumbria University while Rosbottom is head of school at Kingston. "All the work we have done as teachers has been very useful," he says. "We've spent a lot of time talking about these questions." And Stormen is, in the best sense, like the idealised projects of academia — one that aims to be "a total project in the way that used to happen", as Rosbottom puts it. To that end, DRDH opted not to employ an executive architect, instead racking up the airmiles on innumerable site visits. Two years ago, Rosbottom wrote that it offered "the opportunity to be the kind of architects we aspire to be". They have aimed high, and hit the target.

Project team

Architect
DRDH Architects
Design team
Daniel Rosbottom, David Howarth, Jillian Jones, Ewan Stone, Patrick Hayman, Mayuko Kanasugi, Jacob Sjoblom, Phoung Pham, Jef Driesen, Richard Marks, Paolo Scianna, Victoria Jessen Pike, Cecilia Sjoholm, Matthew Phillips, Jonathon Connolly, David de la Mare, Kristin Nilsen
Project manager
Rambøll Norge
Regulation architect
Dark Arkitekter
Structural and services engineer
Norconsult, Arup
Acoustic consultant
Arup Acoustics, Brekke Strand
Theatre consultant
Arup Venue

Selected suppliers & subcontractors

General contractor
Gunvald Johansen
Fit-out contractor
Frapont
Schueco glazing
Bolseth
Superstructure
Rheinertsen
Mechanical services
Caverion
Electrical
Electro Bodø
Theatre audio
Funa
Theatre lighting
Bright
Theatre machinery
Trewerk
Lifts
Schindler Heis
Auditorium seating
Poltrona Frau
Furniture
Fritz Hansen, Arper
Telescopic seating
For a Form, Jezet
Door closers
Geze