NORTHERN LIGHTS

In a remote Norwegian town on the edge of the Arctic Circle, a new library and concert hall transcend their cultural brief to become, in effect, the town's public realm



Library and concert hall, Bodø, Norway
DRDH

2



3



Library and concert hall, Bodø, Norway
DRDH

1. (Previous spread) Bodø's new *Stadtkrone* engages with the sea and volcanic hinterland
2. The buildings have a modest human scale that fits the townscape
3. The two structures face off across the street that leads to the ferry
4. (Opposite) columnar elements impart a subdued representational character to the ensemble. A cluster of tall volumes softens the impact of the flytower on the skyline







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Library and concert hall, Bodø, Norway DRDH

5. (Previous spread) the library has panoramic views over the harbour 6. (Opposite) when the versatile main space of the concert hall is configured for orchestral use, the wood-panelled room has an ideal acoustic 7. The grand scala regia ceremonially leads visitors up through the library

CRITICISM

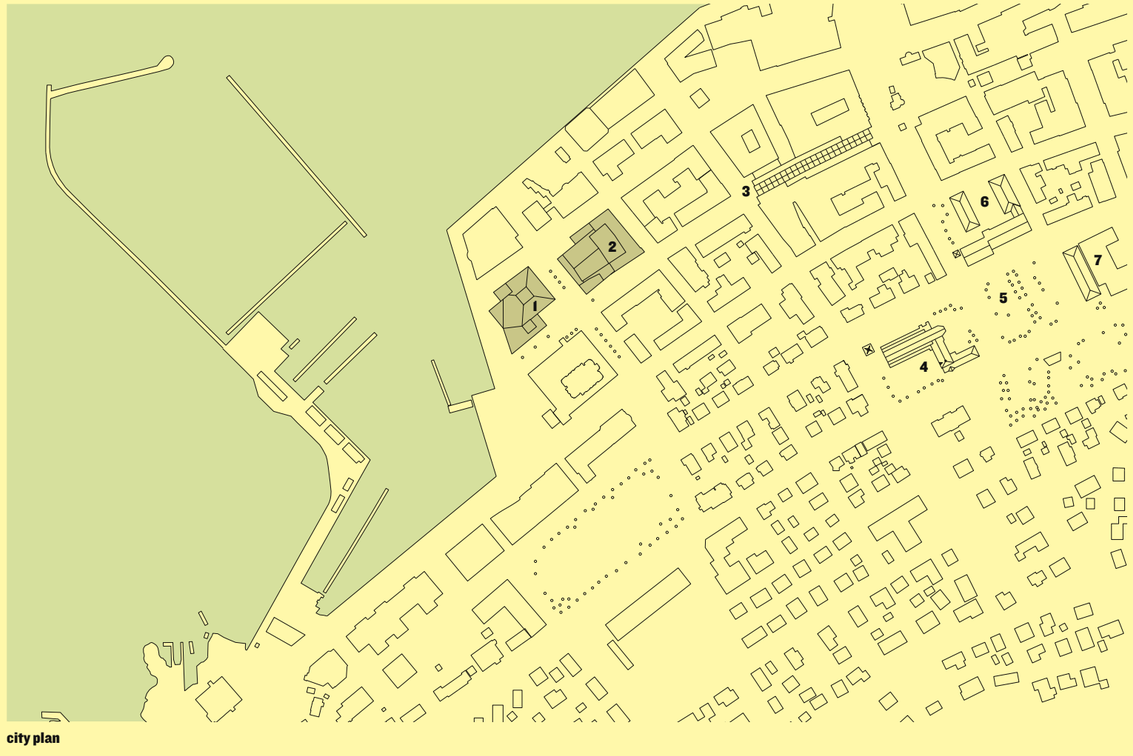
ELLIS WOODMAN

While dating from the early 19th century, Bodø in the north of Norway still feels like a city of provisional not to say fragile urban definition. That impression has much to do with the Luftwaffe attack that all but entirely destroyed its centre in the opening months of the Second World War. Bodø's subsequent redevelopment has seen its population expand tenfold to close to 60,000, but its height remains predominantly low, its layout perforate, its building stock dominated by lightweight and often prefabricated construction. You can walk from airport to downtown in 10 minutes but until recently you would struggle to find much public life when you arrived. The lifestyle here is strongly reliant on car use and, given the nature of the climate, understandably so. Located on the Norwegian Sea, 100km north of the Arctic Circle, the city suffers from an average temperature of 4.5 degrees Celsius and winter months almost entirely bereft of sunlight.

Yet, over the past 20 years, Bodø has made a concerted effort to consolidate its centre. A covered mall now sustains some street life across the year while high-rise hotels and apartment buildings extend along much of its waterfront. The architecture of these buildings is undistinguished but the image of a city is beginning to take form. That process has taken a significant step forward with the recent completion of the first civic buildings to be built in downtown Bodø since the 1956 cathedral. Effectively constituting the city's arts quarter these take the form of a library and concert hall built on adjacent sites, to designs by the young London-based practice DRDH.

They are the product of the firm's victory in three separate competitions: the first for a masterplan followed by two relating to the individual buildings. Entrants to the first competition enjoyed considerable licence about where to site the buildings and many responded by locating them as stand-alone objects on the far side of Bodø's harbour

'The architects cite Christian Norberg-Schulz's observation that Norway's traditional white-painted houses concretise the luminosity of the Nordic summer night'



city plan

Library and concert hall, Bodø, Norway
DRDH

1 library
2 concert hall
3 shopping mall
4 cathedral
5 town hall park
6 town hall
7 post office

0 50m

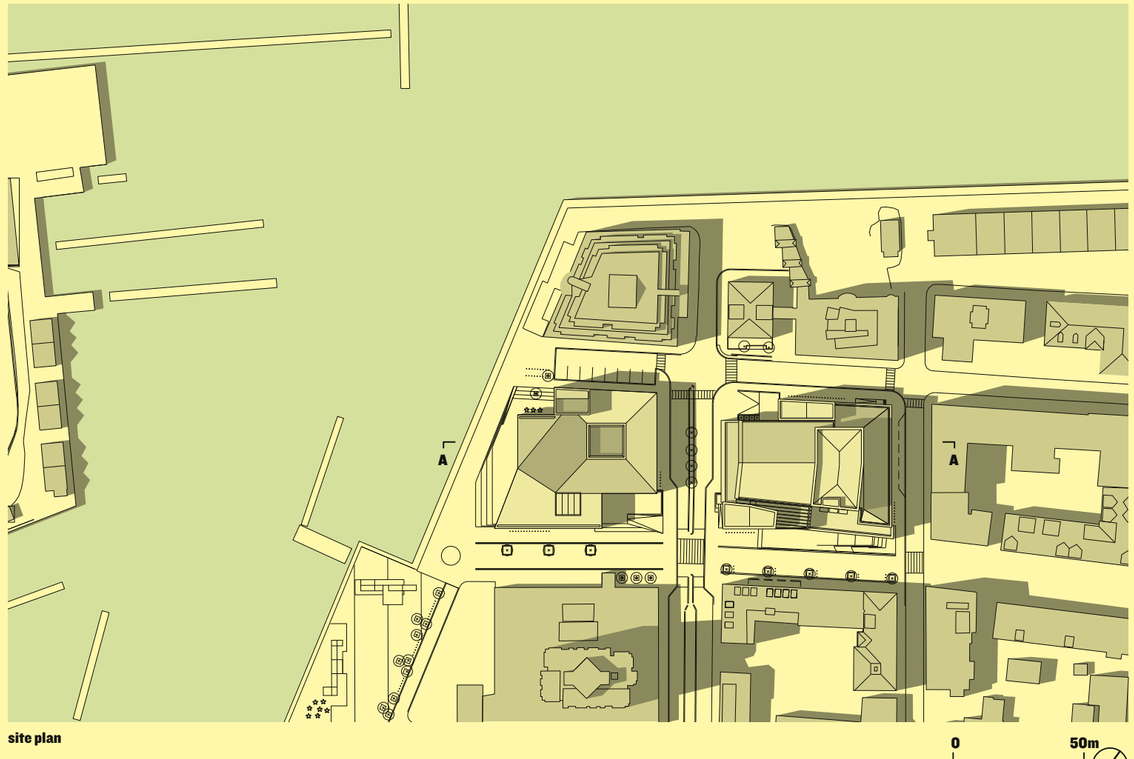
or, in some cases, even in the water. However, DRDH was unpersuaded about the plausibility of asking concertgoers to trek back to town along a wave-lashed esplanade after an evening's entertainment. Instead, it located the buildings on two neighbouring urban blocks at the edge of the city's loose grid plan – ground that once housed industrial activity relating to the adjacent harbour but had served for some years as a surface car park.

Among the competition entrants, DRDH were one of the very few to propose siting the buildings in this location and the only ones to equally weight the relationships to city and harbour. The choice presented challenges – notably the need to undertake significant excavation to fit the concert hall's programme to the constrained plot – but in eschewing the easy appeal of framing the buildings as singular episodes, DRDH has enabled them to make a considerable contribution to bringing Bodø's diffuse urban character into focus.

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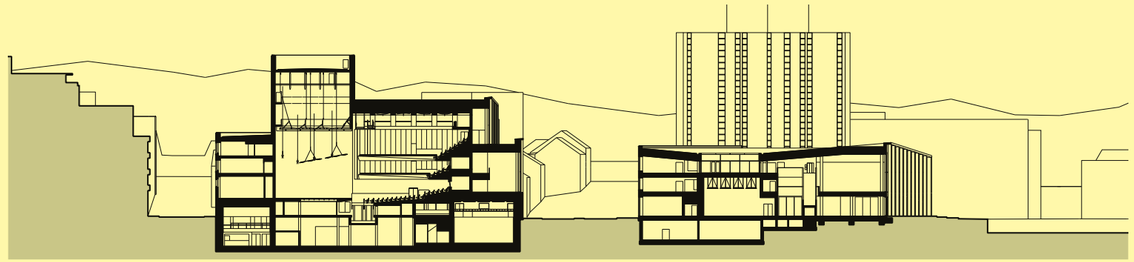
Both structures are highly observant of their responsibilities to the city, adjusting their massing to neighbouring buildings and forming convincing street elevations as required. However, through their shared use of self-supporting white precast concrete facade panels and a sober, classically inflected form language, they also assert their status as an ensemble. The architects recall that on Google-translating the competition briefs they discovered a requirement that the structures should function as 'national monuments'. The solidity and elemental form of the completed buildings certainly lends them a greater sense of permanence than can be claimed for their neighbours. Undoubtedly they will outlast much of their immediate context but you could almost imagine that they predate it too.

The library occupies the westerly block – where it enjoys a frontage to the harbour – while the taller concert hall rises behind. Viewed across the water, they might be taken for a single structure: in each case, the principal water-facing elevation comprises an expanse of glazing articulated by close-ranged concrete fins that terminate in a shallow and skew-whiff gable. Contrasting

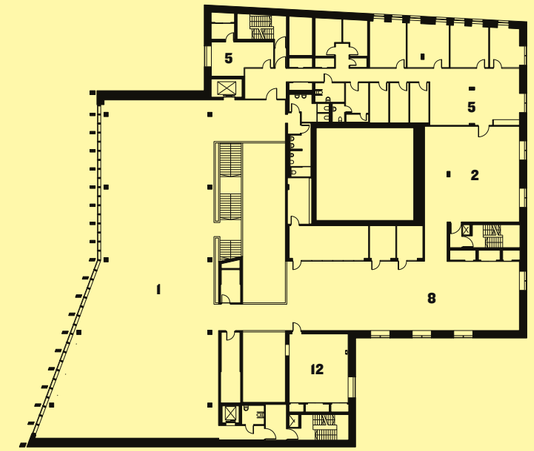


site plan

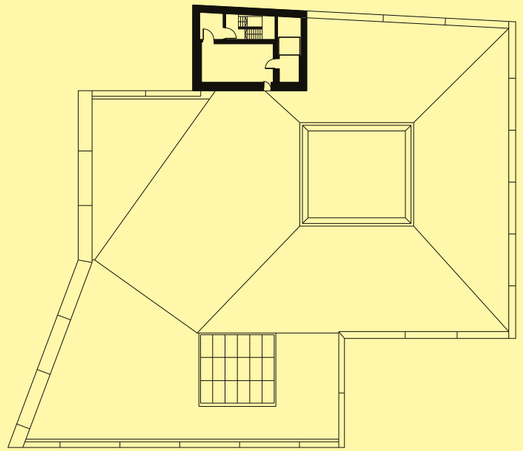
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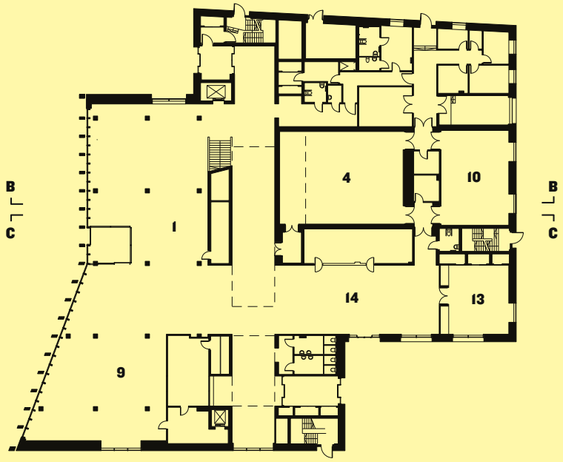
site section AA



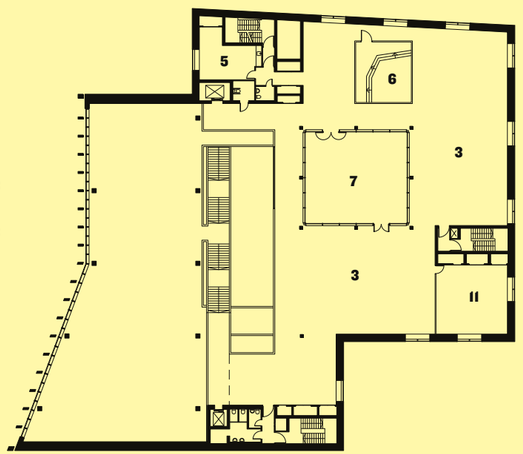
first floor



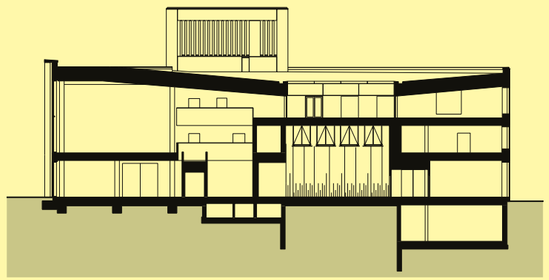
third floor



library ground floor plan



second floor

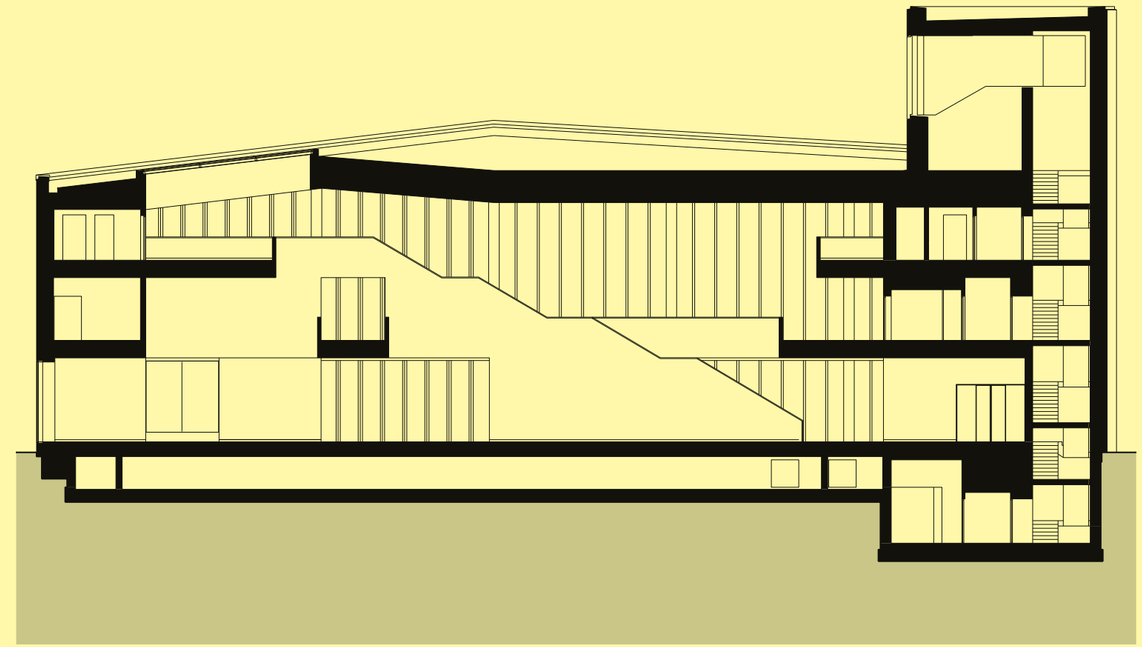


section BB



section CC

8



section DD

Library and concert hall, Bodø, Norway
DRDH

8. Sectional render of the library showing the glazed courtyard on the roof of the building

1 adult library
2 youth library
3 children's library
4 community studio
5 staff office
6 storytelling room
7 courtyard
8 media library
9 newspapers
10 gallery
11 café
12 meeting room
13 multifunction room
14 activity room

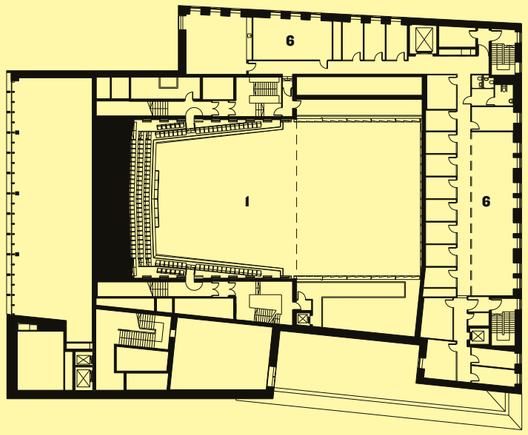
0 20m

with the sparer fenestration used elsewhere, the treatment emphatically orients both buildings towards the harbour. The effect put me in mind of another water-facing building in a far northern city, Thomas de Thomon's 1811 Stock Exchange in St Petersburg and, as there, the imagery carries a strong relationship to that of the Greek temple. However, much as in the work of a later generation of Nordic classicists – that of Asplund and Lewerentz – the buildings ultimately maintain an ambivalent attachment to both classical and vernacular sources. Certainly, memories of the industrial sheds that formerly stood on the site are not entirely banished from mind.

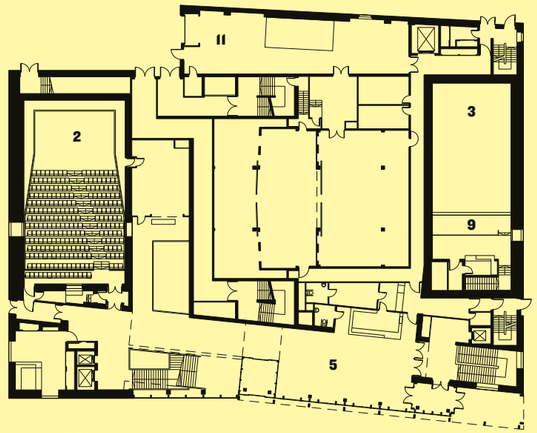
In their interplay of wavering rooflines, the buildings also forge a relationship to the hills that rise behind them on the city's edge. Formed of lava deposits that have been abraded by the region's punishing seaborne wind, the landscape of mountains and small islands that encircles Bodø may be its greatest asset but it is one that the city's introverted layout does little to acknowledge. The new buildings provide it with a more expansive outlook and one oriented as much upwards as outwards. The facade panels' marble aggregate proves highly responsive to the region's light conditions. The architects cite Christian Norberg-Schulz's observation that Norway's traditional white-painted houses 'concretise the luminosity of the Nordic summer night' as an influence on their choice of material. During the few vespertine hours of daylight that I experienced during my recent visit, the buildings seemed to radiate a permanent pinkish glow.

For all that they share in form and material, the spatial experience offered by the buildings is quite distinct. While the concert hall could be characterised as an assembly of rooms, the library comprises a more landscape-like arrangement of spaces distributed beneath the wide embrace of its tent-like roof. Two small squares have been cut into opposing corners – one addressing the city, the other the water – and each gives onto an entrance at either end of a wide internal passage that divides the plan

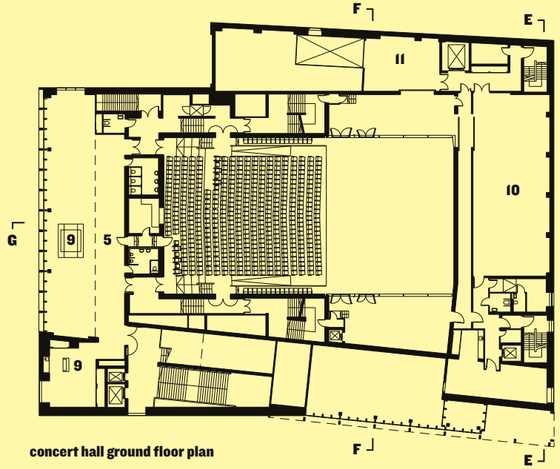
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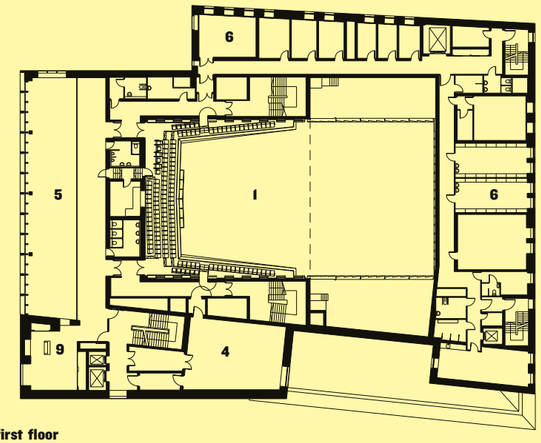
second floor



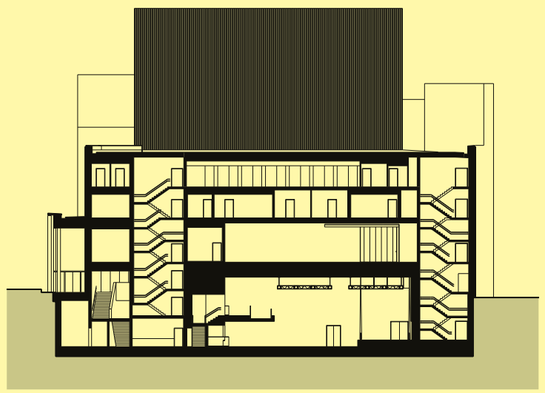
lower ground floor



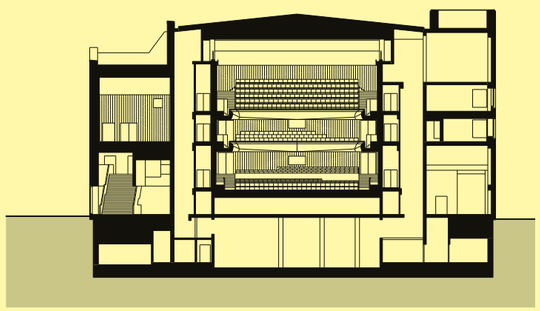
concert hall ground floor plan



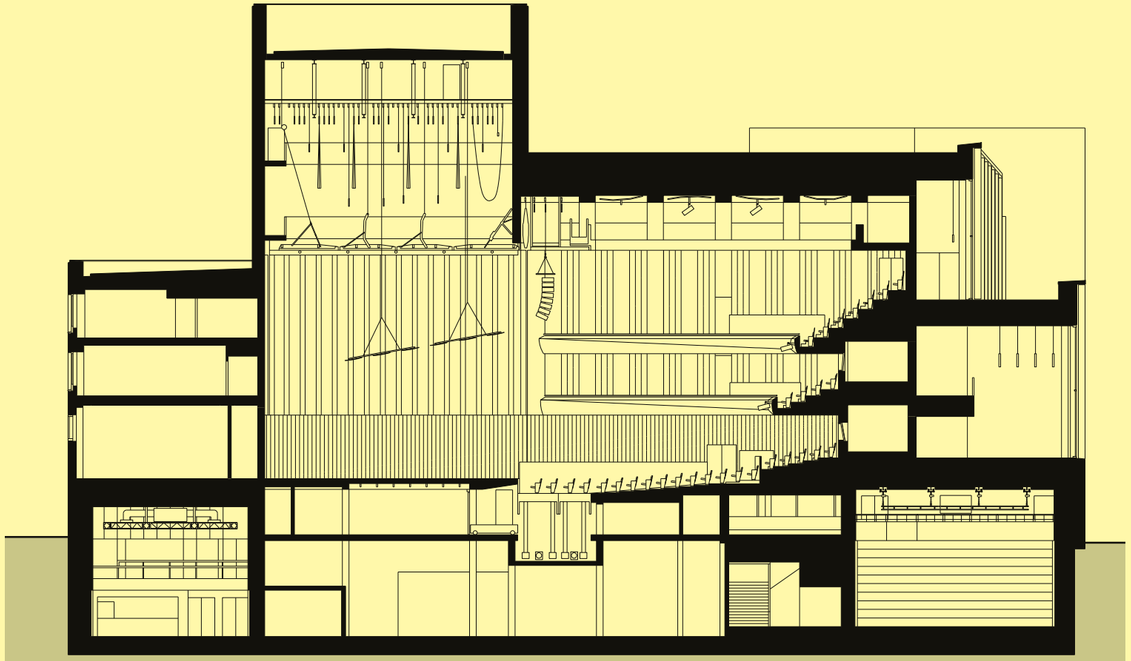
first floor



section EE



section FF



section GG

Library and concert hall, Bodø, Norway
DRDH

9. Sectional render of the concert hall, showing the flytower and underground performance spaces

1 large hall
2 assembly room
3 performance space
4 chamber music room
5 foyer
6 performers' area/ rehearsal rooms
7 offices
8 terrace
9 bar
10 workshop
11 truckloading bar

0 20m

laterally. On one side of this street-like space are the building's more compartmentalised areas – most prominently a lecture hall and gallery – while a monumental scala regia stair extends along the other. Faced in timber and only minimally engaged with the adjacent floorplates, this huge object asserts its figurative autonomy from the surrounding fabric. Climbing it is to encounter a dramatic sequence of vistas. On the first floor you look out across the double-height adult library, through the wall of harbour-facing glazing and out to a distant horizon broken by multiple islands. A storey higher, you find the plan opening up on the other side, at last presenting an experience of the building's full dimensions. Occupied by the children's library, this level adopts a less monumental scale than those below. It is configured around a glazed courtyard towards which the roof draws down establishing the building's lowest ceiling height at its perimeter. A still more intimate setting is provided by miniature free-standing 'houses' where children can sit and read. Their sense of enclosure has been made all the more charged through the maintenance of views across the interior and out to the city and landscape beyond.

The concert hall is of more piecemeal composition – in large part as a product of the architect's efforts to reconcile the main auditorium's flytower to an urban setting composed of buildings of half its height. Facing the city, the entrance takes the form of a loggia that previews the language of concrete fins employed on the harbour-facing elevation. Of near furniture-like scale it represents the lowest element in a composition that gathers height in a loose spiralling action. It is significant that the flytower is not the only vertical element. A smaller tower – composed of bars that form part of the lobby area – stands on one corner while across the road the library houses its rooftop plant in another. Where it might have read as an overbearing incongruity, the flytower has therefore been integrated into an ensemble of like forms.

The concert hall houses three main performance venues. A storey below ground there is a space for jazz and rock performances as well as a small hall for chamber music, both of which are visible through windows set at street level. The main auditorium which extends above them was originally conceived as a multi-purpose space where a symphony orchestra could perform but only with the aid of electro-acoustic enhancement. However, subsequent to the competition it was decided that the building



would serve as the permanent home of the Arctic Philharmonic, a new orchestra assembled from the members of two existing sinfoniettas. Its principal conductor, Christian Lindberg, was adamant that the hall's acoustic performance should not be compromised by the range of activities that it was expected to house.

To that end, DRDH worked with Arup Acoustics to provide the additional volume that would be required for it to host unamplified concerts. Planning regulations prevented an increase in the building's height so the task became one of finding more space within the established envelope. The hall's use as a theatre necessitated the provision of a lighting rig which was to have been serviced by a deck carrying over the auditorium's full extent. By introducing a mobile bridge, which tucks away discreetly when performances are taking place, it became possible to win the space back for the hall. Retractable plywood wall and ceiling panels also play a crucial role in facilitating the desired flexibility. They can be folded out to form a proscenium, providing the wings to either side of the stage required by theatre, dance and opera performances, or reconfigured to give auditorium and stage the appearance of a single, timber-lined box, when it is used as a concert venue. After conducting there for the first time Christian Lindberg professed himself more than delighted, comparing the acoustic performance to that of the venue that remains the gold standard for concert hall design, the Musikverein in Vienna.

This is a startlingly large facility for the scale of the city. At maximum capacity, the three venues can accommodate two per cent of the population of Bodø – a provision that would be thought wildly lavish in nearly any other city. However, during the long months when the climate inhibits street-life, DRDH's buildings are all but alone in offering the chance of large-scale public congregation. Both are precise and poetic responses to complex institutional briefs, but their significance for this community ultimately transcends their programme – it is little exaggeration to claim that, for much of the year, these buildings are Bodø's public realm.

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Library and concert hall, Bodø, Norway
DRDH

10. A passage beneath the stairs which bisect the adult library
11. (Opposite) circulation spaces in the concert hall building have a sober elegance, and during the dark winter months offer a refuge to the community

Architect
DRDH
Photographs
David Grandorge



13



Library and concert hall, Bodø, Norway DRDH

14



12. (Previous spread) the new buildings are physical and metaphorical beacons in the life of this city of the extreme North 13. A café opens onto the street from the concert hall building 14&15 (Opposite) the auditorium accommodates audiences in three tiers. Elegantly minimal seating recalls the best aspects of Scandinavian design

