

For the love of *Art & Music*

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PHOTO: WWW.COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG

The Sydney Opera House is arguably the most recognizable building, not only in Australia, but in the whole world. Danish architect Jørn Utzon's design won out over 232 other entries in a global competition in 1957, many of the other entries from the leading architects of his day. He never visited the planned site before submitting his drawings. His original cost estimate for construction was \$AUS 7 million, and construction began in 1959, employing 10,000 construction workers. Cost overruns were huge, finally totaling \$AUS 102 million.

In February 1966, Utzon resigned from his position as chief architect and head of construction, when the Australian government stopped payments to him. Two months later he left Australia and never returned to see the finished shape of his design. In 1973, the Opera House was finally completed and opened. Utzon was not invited to the ceremony, and his name was not even mentioned in the usual speechmaking. In 2003, however, he won the coveted Pritzker Architecture Prize for his design, 37 years after he was forced to resign from the project. Utzon was the first Dane to receive the award and \$100,000 grant associated with it.

The Sydney Opera House today?

Situated on 14 acres of premium waterfront land, you could park eight 747s wingtip to wingtip in the same space.

With 1,000 rooms, the largest of which is the concert hall that seats 2,679, the facility hosts 3,000 events a year with a combined audience of 2,000,000 people. Two hundred thousand people a year take guided tours of the property. According to accounting firm Deloitte, the facility adds \$775 million to the Australian economy every year.

Dogged by poor planning and a rush to construction for political reasons, it has nevertheless become a national brand that should logically never have happened, but in the process it effectively destroyed the career of Utzon, a very gifted and still the only Danish architect to have won the Pritzker.

Frank Gehry, himself a renowned architect and also on the jury that awarded the 2003 prize, said of Utzon: "Utzon made a building well ahead of its time, far ahead of available technology, and he persevered through extraordinarily malicious publicity and negative criticism to build a building that changed the image of an entire country."

Jørn Utzon died in November 2008 at the age of 90.

Harpa— the latest and unfinished—of the Icelandic Sagas

Harpa, the Icelandic hybrid concert hall

The story of the Sydney Opera House is not the only example of high drama in the high arts. The people of Iceland are living through an architectural saga of their own in the form of Harpa, their new state-of-the-art hybrid opera house and conference center in Reykjavik. But there are some notable differences from the Sydney experience.

For starters, the population of this small nation is 330,000, only 6% of Sydney's population of 5,000,000. The cautious Icelanders began dreaming about an opera house way back in 1881, but they certainly did not rush to construction. It took another century until they agreed on the construction of one, in 1983. It took another two decades for the city and state to agree on the terms of the collaboration, and construction formally began in 2007.

The high price of WOW

At the beginning of the Great Recession, they wanted a national symbol of their optimism and determination, a focal piece for their fledgling ambitions to compete for international tourism. Like the Australians, they hired a Danish architectural firm, Henning Larsen, to design their facility, along with Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson. They wanted an icon that would connect the harbor of Reykjavik with the downtown area; something that—rather than blend in—would be in stark contrast with the narrow streets of the old city.

This was to be far more than a mere revitalization project; it was part of a new Iceland eager to find and expand its place on the world map. And above all, because Iceland is so far north and has so little sunlight during the winter months, they wanted a building that



PHOTO: WWW.WOAIHS.US

Incredible lighting effect varies from season to season.

played with light and color in ways that varied by the seasons. They wanted the WOW factor, and they wanted star power; they wanted starchitects, the best that money could buy.

What you get for 120 million euros

Unfortunately, like the Australians, the economics of the project caught up with them, even more disastrously. In 2008 their entire economy collapsed, and construction on the opera house stopped. After much debate and another year, they decided to move ahead regardless of the cost, and construction resumed on March 9, 2009, the Icelandic government deciding to fully fund the second half of the construction costs.

For several years Harpa was the only significant construction project in all of Iceland. The completed building occupied about a quarter of a million square feet on 15 acres, about 14 stories tall; the main concert hall seats 1,800, and there is a large conference room with a 750-person capacity, two other meeting rooms, and eight small rooms. It was designed to be a hybrid building, combining music hall capabilities with conference center utility. When the winter lights are projected onto the south façade, the resulting kaleidoscopic light show is intended to evoke the aurora borealis, and during the day in different seasons the building magically changes colors. And all this for the low, low price of 120 million euros.



PHOTO: WWW.ARCHISCENE.NET

The vibrant main concert hall seats 1,800 music enthusiasts.

Paying the bills

The Harpa, named after both the stringed instrument and the ancient name of a month in the old Nordic calendar, a month that marked the beginning of summer, held its first event on May 4, 2011, before the façade was completely finished. By August 2011 when it officially opened for business, the scintillating outer shell magically mirrored the harbor and the sky. Inside, the halls form a darker mass with the Main Concert Hall as the red glowing center, in stark contrast with the expressive, sparkling, and open facades of the exterior reflective panels.

In its first year of operation the Icelanders discovered that the cost of maintaining the facility was almost as big a burden as the initial cost of construction. They lost about 6500 euros per operating hour due to taxes, budget overruns, and inadequate gate receipts. To make matters worse, the local university hospital was suffering financially, making people wonder if their government had their priorities straight. Where were all the tourists and businesses that were going to make all this sustainable?

As with the Sydney Opera House, critical recognition and awards eased the pain but did not pay the bills. *Travel + Leisure* magazine gave Harpa Concert Hall the "Best Performance Space 2012" award.

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PHOTO: WWW.PLANETJANETTETRAVELS.COM

Harpa's lobby is "honeycombed" with large 6-pointed panes of clear glass.

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“Build it and they will come”

Thirty-seven European countries competed for the European Prize for Contemporary Architecture (the Mies van der Rohe Award) in 2013, and a total of 337 architectural works were submitted. When he presented the prize to Iceland’s Harpa, the chair of the jury said of the building that it gave “an identity to a society long known for its sagas . . . promoting a dialogue between the city of Reykjavik and the building’s interior life”. High sounding words for a society contemplating whether they would close Harpa before the year was out. Much of the dialogue that year was pretty grim as the country’s leadership found themselves between a rock and a hard place. The inspiration for the building’s design had been the pillow basalt rock found along Iceland’s coasts, and the hard place was paying for it.

They decided they had no choice but to keep the doors open. They couldn’t afford to stay open, and they couldn’t afford to close up. As in the movie *Field of Dreams*, they decided “to build it, in the hopes that they (the tourists) will come”. The saga continues, and you, as the readers of this magazine, may choose to play a bit part in it. If you are thinking of a trip to Norden this year, you may want to include a visit to Harpa—one of the most remarkable buildings in the world—in your travel plans. The Icelanders are keeping the lights on for you.



PHOTO: WWW.CENTRALTRAVELER.COM

The Copenhagen Opera House “My greatest failure”



PHOTO: WWW.FANPOP.COM

Upon the completion of the \$500 million Copenhagen Opera House, locals weren’t sure what to make of it. It was popularly referred to as a fly, a spaceship, and some even accused it of resembling the grill of a 1955 Pontiac when viewed from the front. It was considered the height of arrogance to be placed directly facing the royal palace across the harbor. After all, what royal would want to be greeted each morning with a view of a giant ’55 Pontiac grill from their window overlooking the harbor? Even the architect responsible for the design called it his ‘greatest failure’, and thought it looked like a toaster. A Danish newspaper *Politiken* called it “the biggest disaster of [Henning Larsen’s] professional career.”

A gift with some strings attached

Over a 70-year career, architect Henning Larsen, who later designed the Reykjavik opera house, came to be known as the “master of light.” The commission to design the Copenhagen Opera House was both a capstone and homecoming for the architect with a global reputation for excellence. The cost of the building, a whopping \$500 million+ was to be paid for in its entirety by Arnold Maersk McKinney Møller, Denmark’s wealthiest citizen, who then gave it as a gift to the city. Møller attached a few strings to his gift, including the stipulations that it be built on land he had bought in the East Harbor, directly opposite the Amalienborg Palace, the home of the Danish royal family. An absolute second condition of the gift is that it would open no more than four years after it was commissioned. Which meant that in 2001 ground was being excavated before the plans were even completed. It opened in 2004, on schedule.

A conflict of will and vision?

Typically large projects paid for by public funds involve groups of people in the decision-making process, and the first and most important decision is the choice of architect. After that, most matters of taste are deferred to the architect as the hired expert and the one with the overall

vision for the project. In the case of the Copenhagen Opera House, the project owner was one person, who had very strong opinions about a lot of the details of the project, resulting in clashes of will between Møller, in his eighties, and architect Henning Larsen, in his seventies, who was in the awkward position of being hired for his expertise and then being occasionally overruled by the owner.

According to some press reports at the time, there were differences in the final appearance of the Copenhagen Opera House compared to the architect’s original vision.

Henning Larsen an acolyte of Jørn Utzon

Architect Henning Larsen, who died in June 2013, has long been one of Copenhagen’s favorite sons. In fact Copenhagen’s website lists him as one of Denmark’s seven all-time best architects. Some say he was Denmark’s best ever. He was mentored by Jørn Utzon, and worked for him the year after Utzon won the commission for the Sydney Opera House. When



PHOTO: WWW.GALLERYHP.COM

Tiers of opera enthusiasts are silhouetted against brightly-lit interior background.

Henning Larsen won the commission for the Copenhagen Opera House, he must have been thinking it was his chance to do for Copenhagen what Utzon had done for Sydney. Instead, the intended horse [design] on the field of compromise between owner and architect became the proverbial camel.

Philosophies of architecture

Architecture, like all of the arts, is affected by the winds of changing

philosophies over long stretches of time. Because the career of Henning Larsen lasted almost seven decades, and he was personally involved in the Sydney, Reykjavik, and Copenhagen opera houses and beyond, this is a good time to observe how ideas change art.

Let’s go back to the Sydney Opera House. At the 2003 ceremony awarding the Pritzker prize to Utzon, Pritzker Prize jury chairman, Lord Rothschild,

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PHOTO: WWW.COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG

The Opera House, view from the Amalienborg Palace, directly across Copenhagen’s East Harbor.



Lobby of Copenhagen Opera House is light and airy.

(Continued from page 33) commented, “Jørn Utzon created one of the great iconic buildings of the twentieth century, an image of great beauty known throughout the world. In addition to this masterpiece, he has

worked throughout his life fastidiously, brilliantly, quietly and *with never a false or jarring note*” (emphasis added).

Bill Lacy, an architect who spoke as the executive director of the Pritzker Prize, said: “Utzon has always been

ahead of his time. He rightly joins the handful of Modernists who have shaped the past century with buildings of *timeless and enduring quality*” (emphasis added).

Jørn Utzon was a modernist, as was Henning Larsen and these jurists, in 2003, praised him for sticking to his principles of modernism, which has been under increasing attack in the last quarter century. Juror Jorge Silvetti, who chairs the Department of Architecture, Graduate School of Design at Harvard University clarifies: “Paradoxically, while the act of awarding in 2003 the Pritzker Prize to Jørn Utzon may be perceived as long overdue, it comes at such a particular moment in the development of architecture as to be timely and exemplary. *In the current frenzy of unbound personal expressionism and blind subordination to attention-grabbing production techniques, his explorations remind us that both ‘expression and technique’ are servants and secondary to more profound and*

PHOTO: WWW.GREENSTRATEGYSE



Decorated in warm rich tones, the Opera House main auditorium seats 1,800 people.

PHOTO: WWW.WAAGNER-BIRO.COM

foundational architectural ideas. His work shows us that the marvelous and seemingly ‘impossible’ in architecture depend still on genial minds and able hands.” (emphasis added)

In plain English, Utzon was being praised for sticking to the basics of architecture, such as form that follows function, which simply means make sure your pretty building will adequately perform the function for which it was designed; that the owners will still love the building after the awards ceremonies are long over. Innovative design made sense in the service of the greater value, a useful building and effective, meaningful use of space. Dissonance, chaos, and novelty were not considered values in themselves.

The rise of postmodernism in architecture

In today’s uber-competitive architectural milieu, postmodernism prevails, with its criticism of old ways and values, and in architecture, the devaluing of context. Trophy buildings are valued mostly for their WOW effect, and architects are expected to produce major monuments in cities and neighborhoods they’ve never or rarely visited. In the world of fierce competitions, adjustments and organic growth of a building idea and plan are looked down on. Avant-garde novelty is prized above all, and each new structure must dominate its neighborhood; every submission must be “iconic.”

While there have always been architects who have led in their field, they were minor celebrities seldom known outside the profession. Today’s professionals seek household recognition and contracts are increasingly awarded based on star power, the presence of young architects who are currently enjoying high media visibility. Focus in the profession has moved from “timelessness” to the stark and startling. The unanswered question is whether the pursuit of novelty will withstand the test of time. Will future generations love these structures as much as today’s media does?

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The fantastic Guggenheim museum in Bilbao, Spain.

PHOTO: WWW.VSTUDENTS.NING.COM

The Bilbao Effect

Architect Frank O. Gehry had decades to study the evolution of the Sydney Opera House from a structural and political quagmire into one of the world’s most recognized landmarks. His design of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (Spain) is a form of iconoclasm, a distinct departure from the conventions and dogmas of modernism.

At a cost of \$89 million USD, he produced a design that has been called a “titanium artichoke” that put a decrepit port area of Bilbao on the map and turned the fortunes of the town around. It was hailed as one of the best examples of Deconstructionist architecture in existence. (Deconstructionism is a school of postmodern architecture known for its lack of ‘harmony, unity, or continuity,’ that is, those characteristics of a building that would normally cause us to conclude it was “beautiful.”) Wikipedia says, “The finished visual appearance is characterized by unpredictability and controlled chaos.” Deconstructionism in architecture demands jarring notes.

The Guggenheim museum in Bilbao was so phenomenally successful that financially strapped communities all over the world wondered if the “Bilbao effect” could work for them too. This is part of the reason for the rising celebrity status of *starchitects*, those most aggressive players in the “can-you-top-this?” architectural sweepstakes that so often dominate the competitions.

The Deconstructionist architectural movement puts pressure on modernists and others, whose designs evolved throughout the project; their early sketches often had little resemblance to their finished buildings; and their buildings often seem an organic outgrowth of the landscape in which they are planted. Henning Larsen was a great architect, but he was not part of the *starchitect* phenomenon, although artist Olafur Eliasson with whom he collaborated on the Harpa Opera House certainly has some rock star qualities. In a sense they came from different parts of the design universe, but their collaboration on Harpa was very successful because they shared the same vision.

In the Copenhagen Opera House, there is unquestionably beauty in the parts, but there is conflict of visions and simple failure to agree among the principals. Henning Larsen was no deconstructionist and he did not seek novelty as an end in itself. His many buildings are of very high quality and have enduring appeal that will most certainly outlast the manias of the moment. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so you can decide for yourself as you compare design ideas in this article and elsewhere. In your opinion, does the spectacular in architecture imply heightened culture or grandiosity for its own sake?



PHOTO: WWW.PINTEREST.COM

The Oslo Opera House and the democratization of opera

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Norway, with about 5.5 million people or roughly the same population as the city of Sydney, Australia, built an opera house that opened in 2008 and cost approximately \$700 million to democratize Norwegian opera and make it more accessible. Norway is a young country, having gained its independence in 1905, and opera and ballet are relatively young art forms for Norwegians.

Norway's first opera star

Norway had its first opera star in Kirsten Flagstad, born in Hamar, Norway, and who made her singing debut in Oslo in 1913. She performed for the *Opera Comique* during its start-up year of 1919. She was noticed by Otto Hermann Kahn, the chairman of the New York Metropolitan Opera when he was on tour in Scandinavia in 1929. She auditioned at St. Moritz in 1934 and was hired immediately. She became an instant sensation and box office sales rocketed, some even saying Kirsten saved the venerable Met from bankruptcy at the time. By the time Kirsten had retired in 1952 she had performed in San Francisco, Chicago, and Australia, and had established

herself as one of the leading Wagnerian sopranos in operatic history.

Opera and ballet are both very international art forms, and performers come together onto a single stage from every corner of the globe. Although Norway quickly gained international presence because of Kirsten Flagstad, Norwegian opera still had no home stage to which they could invite famous guest artists. The National Opera and Ballet was established only 52 years after Norway got its independence, in 1957, and it shared space at the Folketeatret Theatre with other organizations at the time. It specialized in presenting operas composed and sung by Norwegians. Kirsten Flagstad was the first director of the National Opera and she paid some of the salaries out of her own pocket during the first two years of its existence.

The National Opera and Ballet in search of a home

Opera itself has a reputation for highbrow entertainment and snob appeal. It is often expensive to attend, mostly because performances require an entire orchestra (sometimes 100 musicians), a significant choir, large props and staff to move them around between scenes, incredible acoustics,



PHOTO: WWW.FJORDTRAVEL.COM

Roomy gallery accommodates many visitors to the Oslo Opera House.

dressing rooms and huge amounts of space to store everything. Opera began in Europe, and generally required two people: a composer of the music, and a librettist to write the words the performers sing. Operas are basically simple stories put to music. The words were written in the native language of the librettist, usually German, Italian, or French. It wasn't until the 20th century that the English speaking world got interested in opera, and unfortunately it is extraordinarily

difficult to translate the opera story into another language and have it convey the original meaning and remain sing-able in time with the musical composition. Try literally translating "Happy Birthday" into French and then sing it to the tune of the melody we know. You get the idea. So opera continues to be sung in the language of the original librettist.

Most opera houses today have the technological capability of projecting English-language subtitles of what is being sung onto a screen above the stage. The Oslo Opera House has small screens on the back of seats, airplane style, with the libretto translated into several languages. Opera means a lot more if you know the story. Opera singers are also stage performers, and they tend to play their parts with great exaggeration, so it is generally not hard to figure out what is going on. Most of the operas are tragedies, and opera is essentially a revival of early Greek drama. The singing comes in two forms: arias and recitative. During the recitative the words are important because they move the story forward, conversations are taking place, and the music becomes more subdued. During the arias the acting stops, the actual words become less important, the music becomes more prominent, and it is all about emotion.

Tuxedo or snowboard?

Snob appeal and accessibility? Originally opera was so expensive to produce, only the affluent and nobility could afford to go. There was a time when the Venetian Republic was the only place in Europe where you could attend an opera performance. Obviously it made a statement if you were invited and had the wherewithal to show up. And people dressed the part, as regally as possible. Today the custom continues in that an opera is one of the few places where you can really dress up and strut your stuff, outside of a wedding. So people dress up to be seen and to see. However, the dress standard has relaxed and with few exceptions you can go dressed however you please, and no one will ask you to wear an ill-fitting red jacket.



PHOTO: WWW.THEPOLISHBLOG.ORG

A popular spot to relax, soak up some sun and enjoy leisure time with friends.

Still, unless you want to be a part of the spectacle, I'd dress up a step or two from a tank top and sandals. Sometimes it's fun to dress up.

One of the things I love about the Oslo Opera House is that it is designed so you can walk on the roof and get fantastic panoramic views of the city as you ascend the inclines that serve as walls on the interior of the building. It may not be encouraged, but in the winter you can snowboard at the opera, and in the summer you can soak up some sunshine in a bikini. At the opera house! The foyer is open 24 hours a day. This is space and fun for locals and tourists alike; performance halls for every type of music; a place to meet and eat; and if you wish, to experience the drama and high notes with some of the

best acoustics in the world.

Any building that costs \$700 million to build seeks to achieve monumentality, but the Oslo Opera House does this by horizontal extension instead of with number of vertical floors. The main hall will seat 1400; a second performance hall will seat 400, and a black box theater seats another 150. The main performance hall is in the standard horseshoe configuration to maximize closeness to the stage and eliminating any barriers to a clear line of sight. The roofline descends from the fly tower all the way down to the water's edge, and this is an appropriate symbolism of where art and the public meet; where land meets the sea; and where Norway meets the world.

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PHOTO: WWW.ARCHITRAVEL.COM

Viewing screens

The Oslo Opera House main auditorium seats 1,364. Notice the small "airplane style" screens on the back of each seat.

“Death by Opera”—in old Stockholm

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Many coerced by friends or family to attend an opera performance have probably thought they were being threatened with death by opera, and they survived only by falling asleep during the performance, much to the annoyance of their benefactors. However, that was not the case with Swedish King Gustav III, who considered himself an enlightened king who encouraged the arts in his realm, and who founded Sweden’s Royal Opera. His was a brief golden age for all the arts, and he is considered the father of Swedish theater.

Gustav was himself an actor, and his ambition was to develop a Swedish tradition to replace the French influence in the arts. He personally wrote several comedies and historical dramas and provided foreign training for incipient Swedish talent. He founded the Royal Opera, and the first performance was on January 18, 1773. It was a grand opera by Uttini entitled *Thetis och Pelée*, the first opera in the Swedish language. The first Swedish opera house did not open for another nine years, in 1792. It was torn down exactly 100 years later, and was thereafter referred to by art historians as the Gustavian Opera.



The Opera House takes on an impressive aura during evening performances.

PHOTO: WWW.FREDMANPAKVARNBERGET.BLOGSPOT.COM



King Gustav III, of Sweden

PHOTO: WWW.COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG

Murder at the opera

On March 16, 1792, King Gustav III was shot by nobleman Jacob Johan Anckarström, and he died seven days later. The event itself inspired two new operas, one by Verdi. The culprit was caught by tracing the revolver, which he dropped during his escape, to local gunsmiths who identified him. He was tried and convicted, and he was sentenced to be cast in irons for three days and publicly flogged, his right hand to be cut off, his head removed, and his corpse quartered. The execution took place on April 27, 1792.

The murder of his father at the Royal Opera left a bad taste in the mouth of his son and successor, Gustav IV, who



Ornate Operan Opera House entrance facade

PHOTO: WWW.COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG



Sweden's first Opera House.

Sweden's first Opera House

The first Swedish Opera House was an imposing structure in classical style, with a portico of four Corinthian columns supporting four statues and a royal crown. We are told the oval shaped performance hall had four

tiers, excellent acoustics and clear sight lines, the holy grail of opera house architecture. Then as now, opera houses were often multi-purpose facilities for all types of galas and performances. One such event inspired by masked balls in Paris, often held in operas houses as the most opulent edifices, and attended by many a ne'er-do-well in drag, was the Swedish masquerade ball.



Sweden's second Opera House was completed in 1899 and still stands today.

closed the opera down, and it was not reopened until 1812.

It is of note that the family of Anckarström changed its name to Löwenström, and one of their living descendants is actress Alexandra Neil, who has played parts in soap operas such as *As the World Turns* and *One Life to Live*. Only occasionally does life dish up such ironies.

Sweden's second Opera House

A second Royal Opera House in heavily classical style was completed by 1899 and still stands today. It was inaugurated by King Oscar II and is



Drottningholm Palace's theater located on the palace ground.

PHOTO: WWW.COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG



PHOTO: ANDERS RISING PHOTOGRAPHY

Drottningholm theater stage is still in use today.

referred to as the *Oscarian Opera*, or more simply *Operan*. The auditorium is slightly smaller than the previous one, seating 1,200. There is a grand staircase from the foyer with ubiquitous elaborate stucco. The orchestra of the opera, the Royal Swedish Orchestra, is one of the oldest in Europe, dating back to 1526.

Drottningholm Palace

It is worth noting that *Operan* is not the only surviving opera house in Stockholm. Just outside the city is Drottningholm Palace, to which a theatre was added. After a fire the theatre was rebuilt in 1766, and today it is one of the best preserved theatres

in all of Europe. After Gustav's assassination, the theater was forgotten until 1920 when it was revived. There is a festival each summer when a play is staged in the theater, using the original equipment including a wave machine, a thunder machine, and a flying chair. If you are planning a trip to Stockholm this year, you might want to check the dates of this festival and include it in your plans. Otherwise,

regular opera season runs from September through May.



PHOTO: WWW.PINTEREST.COM

Drottningholm Palace theater includes the original wave machine, a thunder machine, and a flying chair.



PHOTO: WWW.BEGA.DE

Why The Helsinki Music Centre Could Only Exist in Helsinki

Unlike the other buildings in this round-up, the Helsinki Music Centre is not an Opera House. They already have one of those, the Finnish National Opera, and it was completed in 1993. The Music Centre, on the other hand, was conceived in 1999 and completed in 2011. It cost a modest \$271 million, enough to give some conservative Finns a twitchy eye, but only about half of what the comparable Copenhagen Opera House cost to build. The Helsinki Music Centre is so, so Finnish.

How to blend in

The first, and perhaps major architectural challenge is that the planned site for the facility was already surrounded by landmarks, all of different architectural styles and periods. Should the new music center try to blend in, or tower above them and dominate the neighborhood in true iconic style? This was a mature and prestigious neighborhood, not an effort to gentrify a harbor. This was Töölönlahti, Helsinki. The aging Finlandia Hall, and Kiasma, the museum of contemporary art, were their pre-existing neighbors, and Finland's Parliament was across the street.

In typical Finnish fashion, the winning entry in the architectural competition called their proposed project *A Mezza Voce*. They proposed

an understated building that would unify the surroundings with great ingenuity, including putting more than half of the Music Centre underground, so that its roofline would not compete with other neighboring structures. Instead, a wide sloping terrace covers the underground structure.

The main concert hall will accommodate 1,704 people, but it is designed in terraced, vineyard style that separates the audience into smaller neighborhoods or micro communities within the same room. Instead of the traditional horseshoe arrangement of seating, the stage is in the center with the seating spread out in 360 degrees around and above it. In some cases this meant you might actually be sitting above, over, and behind the orchestra, and with a transparent balustrade, you are looking directly down at them.



PHOTO: WWW.RAISONPUUSEPÄTI

Terraced vineyard-style seating separates audience into smaller micro communities.



PHOTO: WWW.OHDESIGNBLOG.COM

Powerful ornamental fixture dominates the main hall.



PHOTO: WWW.OHDESIGNBLOG.COM

Acoustics are everything

The all-important acoustics were designed by Dr. Yasuhisa Toyota, whose twin goals were richness and clarity. The building now houses the Sibelius Academy, named after Finland's most famous composer, Jean Sibelius, whose *Finlandia* is considered Finland's unofficial national anthem. The purpose of the Academy is to cultivate young talented musicians. The Music Centre also houses two excellent symphony orchestras, Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra and the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra.

It has been said the new Music Centre and its refined acoustics have been needed for almost 75 years. Finlandia Hall—one of its neighbors—was built to promote a meeting place and performance center, but its acoustics were always a disappointment. So the Finns built the Helsinki Music Centre with purpose and focus. It was not about the designers, although over 30 architects from the successful firm of LPR Architects from Turku, Finland, actually contributed to the design, and it is thoroughly Finnish in its clean lines, advanced technology, and pursuit of accommodation and unity. As one observer put it, “even the walls speak in an undertone, leaving space for music.”

Epilogue

In our tour of four Nordic opera houses and one performance center, we have witnessed the expenditure of almost \$1.5 billion. There have been team work and conflict, elation and disappointment; careers made and broken on massive reaction to new structures after the money is spent. Some of it is about the love of art and music, and some is about our need to belong; our monuments to our group identities. Some of it is about striving and rivalry and besting others. We bring together artists and individual design talent from all over the world to collaborate on one particular project to create an enduring symbol promoting or celebrating one country, region, or ethnic group. Architectural firms are aggregators of design ideas and the technical talent to bring great buildings into existence; individual contributions to a collective product. No matter the what or why, they are ours to ponder, evaluate, and appreciate.

Whatever our individual preferences are, it is amazing to see what can be achieved through the endless ingenuity of the human mind. The next time you travel to the five Nordic countries, be sure to include these amazing buildings on your itinerary. Use as many of your senses as you can. Smell the wood. Marvel at the shapes. Look for the play of light on all kinds of surfaces at all times of the day and night. Listen to the sounds, even listen to the quiet. Hear the music. Put your feet in the water. Feel the textures. Imagine the minds and teamwork that made all this come together.

Every one of these buildings is a mini-city within a city, and God is in the functional integrity of every detail. Will this building be a source of endless irritation and regret to the people who spend most of their lives there, or will they love its ingenuity, art, and most of all, attention to operational detail after the ceremonies are over? Imagine an airport without enough electrical outlets to recharge your peripherals. Imagine discovering in your new home that the hot and cold water faucets were all installed backwards, the hot being where the cold should be. Now imagine how many things have to be done right for it to be a pleasure to work, or even visit a \$100, \$500, or \$700 million dollar building.

There's a story going around Helsinki about someone asking the lead architect of the Helsinki Music Centre if there is anything in the building that is still not perfect. He purportedly replied, well, yes, we do have a problem with the men's toilet on the fourth floor.

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Interview with Louis Becker

Design Principal, Henning Larsen Architects - Copenhagen, Denmark

By John Bechtel - Freelance Travel & Culture Writer



Louis Becker has been part of the management since 1998, also during the design of the Copenhagen Opera House project. As the Design Principal for Henning Larsen Architects firm, he has a leading role in the design of projects in currently 23 countries worldwide. One of the firms other renowned concert halls is the Harpa project in Reykjavik. He lives in Copenhagen and has three children, that he tries to spend as much time with as possible when he is not traveling professionally 120 days a year. In an interview with Scandinavian Press, it was obvious that this is someone who is passionate about what he does and who loves his profession.

SP: How and why did you become an architect?

LB: Both of my parents worked with their hands in the decorative arts. Besides owning a restaurant, my father was also an artist, a painter, and my mother worked with ceramics. So I was already oriented towards putting things together and making it work. I started out in an unrelated job where I quickly discovered everything was constantly about efficiency. Then I worked for a small architectural firm and was inspired. The whole atmosphere was different; it was playful, about exploring and testing new ideas.

SP: How do you typically find out about projects? Is it usually through an invitation to bid in a competition? Do you have to chase opportunities or do they come to you?

LB: Some of both. We do a lot of networking; we make connections by

being out there in the marketplace. We also get lots of opportunities from people looking at our website.

SP: How would you describe the early conversations between a potential client and the architectural company? Does the client usually have a well-formed concept or only vague ideas?

LB: They typically have papers, and a budget, but they may not have put a physical form to it. We condense and qualify what we learn from the client. We put the project up on a wall, and we brainstorm. As we move forward from the theoretical we usually begin with sketches (as opposed to detailed drawings) and the issues gradually become apparent. We test out a variety of options with the client and 99% of the time these conversations are very fruitful.

SP: How do you feel about the so-called Bilbao Effect? Has novelty trumped practical considerations in architecture?

LB: Some clients seek extreme novelty, and this is fine if this is what they really want. But as we work through the budget and different options, we emphasize the long-term importance of the people factor, functionality and sustainability issues, the impact of climate and environment, and usually the client understands as compromises have to be made. We come from a Danish culture, and at one time Denmark was a poor country with limited resources. As a people, we have a tradition of being respectful of resources and careful with other people's money. I am not a fan of unlimited budgets. It gets boring. It is taking the easy way out.

In design competitions, we do not start with the grand idea. Instead, we listen to the context and analyze to bring out the potential of the project. Then we start drawing. You have to start out with a strong strategic design concept to have a robust project that can bear adjustments in the process and still meet the requirements and design ambitions.

SP: How do young architects establish themselves as leaders in their field?

How do the starchitects come into their recognition?

LB: Some start their own companies and quickly earn a reputation for themselves. We hire talent from all over the world and it makes us a better company because old ideas can become embedded into an organization, including ours. We see this sometimes in our clients' organizations too, they develop a certain blindness to new ways of doing things; when we as outsiders come in with ideas they may say, that won't work here, and then they find it does, to their surprise.

So we like fresh blood and new ideas, but we are not about "star performers." They can be a nuisance, and when the focus is on only a few individuals it distracts from the design and purpose of the project. Today's projects are way too complicated for a handful of star performers; they require a strong team effort and a high level of specialization.

SP: What can you share with us about the disappointments experienced with the Copenhagen Opera House?

LB: Henning Larsen worked with the client for more than twenty years, on different projects. The Opera project was widely discussed in the Danish media and some internal disagreements ended up on the front pages. When you see the Opera today, the quality of the design, details and materials are very high, even though there was a very strict time frame imposed. Henning was very satisfied with the large, generous foyer— one of the largest in Europe. In the foyer, you have a great view of the Copenhagen harbor and all the other guests. On the Opera, we met the artist Olafur Eliasson and that led to a collaboration at Harpa with great results.

SP: It seems there are many stakeholders in a new building and that design is a very political process. How do you navigate through the egos?

LB: (Laughing) I'm sorry I can't give you a recipe for that. All I can say is they don't teach you about that in architect's school.