

VOLKER GIENCKE

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“Great Amber” Concert Hall as a new landmark of Liepaja, Latvia

The multifunctional complex has been opened on November 7, 2015

Designed by Graz architect Volker Giencke, the Great Amber Concert Hall has been inaugurated on 7 November in Liepaja, Latvia. The first – and most momentous – phase of this multistage project envisioning the construction of a cultural urban district is thus completed. In 2003, Volker Giencke won the international architectural competition for a new cultural centre in this traditional seaport on the Baltic Sea. The construction work started in 2013.

“Great Amber” is a monolithic, cone-shaped, slightly contorted structure with a transparent, amber-coloured façade. This façade envelops the irregular folded work of the concrete structure built around the building’s most important architectural element: the grand Concert Hall providing seating for more than 1,000 visitors. The hall itself is surrounded by the rooms of the Liepaja Symphony Orchestra and the Music School’s instruction and rehearsal rooms, thus producing a favourable blend of space to foster communication between artists, students and teachers. An additional Chamber Hall situated beneath the Concert Hall as well as a Ballet Studio and an Experimental Stage with a foyer, Bar & Music Club on the fifth floor complete the spatial concept.

The Concert Hall can also be adapted for congresses, exhibitions and receptions by elevating the orchestra pit and the stalls. Moreover, “Civita Nova” offers an additional 2,000 m² of space for multifunctional events, thus fully responding to the architect’s idea of “Great Amber” as a venue catering for all kinds of purposes that is freely accessible to the people of Liepaja.

Volker Giencke also developed the acoustics concept together with Karlheinz Müller / Müller-BBM, Munich; they achieved excellent results, with acoustics based on the principle of an oval, terraced vineyard. Reaching high above the roof, fourteen mirror-finished reflective tubes flood the Concert Hall with daylight, creating a unique atmosphere inside.

Light plays a key role at the façade of “Great Amber”, too. Attached to a delicately interwoven steel construction, its amber-coloured glazing bathes the inside area in soft warm light. At night, the building turns into a transparent luminous element, making its interior and many different functions visible from the outside. During the day, the building’s external glazing glows in varying surrounding colours and shades, offering truly stunning impressions. Convincing in terms of both architecture and content, this symbolic effect emphasises “Great Amber’s” connection to the city. It is a new landmark of modern Liepaja.

Chamber Music Hall inaugurated on October 18, 2015 with the Berlin Philharmonic String Quintet

The Chamber Music Hall was inaugurated on 18th October with a festive concert featuring the Berlin Philharmonic String Quintet. Latvian born double bass player of the Berlin Philharmonic String Quintet Gunars Upatnieks says, full of enthusiasm: “It’s an amazing feeling! For us, it was a twofold premiere, seeing the Concert Hall for the first time and playing this concert for the first time in this lineup. The acoustics were excellent!”

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The acoustic concept of Müller-BBM

The grand Concert Hall has a seating capacity of over 1,000. Its acoustically effective volume is around 11,200 m³. When the hall and the orchestra podium are fully occupied, reverberation time still reaches 1.8 to 2.0 seconds, increasing again towards the lower frequencies, thus lending the necessary warmth to the sound. Perfect conditions for classical concert performances. With its tiers and balconies, the form of the hall follows the classic terraced vineyard pattern, thus enabling intimate proximity to the artists on the podium while everyone in the auditorium still enjoys the full spatial acoustics, no matter where they sit. Filigree decorative elements on the ceilings and walls effect a diffuse blend of acoustics for well-balanced sound quality without excessive clarity.

The Chamber Music Hall has a seating capacity of 180 and an acoustically effective volume of 1,200 m³, guaranteeing well-balanced and sophisticated sound quality at chamber music performances.

Behind large white acoustically transparent wall coverings made of fabric, variable sound absorbent curtains are used to reduce long natural reverberation times in both halls.

Together with permanently installed sound reinforcement systems, this type of sound absorption ensures very good speech and consonant intelligibility in both halls. It is therefore possible to use the concert halls, especially the larger one, for non-musical events such as conferences, lectures and congresses.

“It is a wonder, something really special that only happens once in a hundred years”, is how Indulis Kalns, a well-known local architect, has characterised the amazing new building. And he is quite right: it is a wonder – to marvel at, to touch and above all, to listen to.

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Great Amber Project Team

General planner: Giencke & Company – Latvija PS, Riga

Author & Architect: Volker Giencke

Planning: Volker Giencke & Company, Graz

Project management: Petra Friedl

Acoustics: Müller BBM, Karlheinz Müller, Munich/Planegg

Stage technic: Bühnenplanung Walter Kottke, Bayreuth

Structural engineer: Johann Birner, Graz

Building technology concept: Altherm Engineering, Hans Haugeneder, Baden/Vienna

Lighting designer: Bartenbach Lichtlabor, Christian Bartenbach, Innsbruck

Landscape planning: Paul Giencke, Berlin

Partner architect: SIA Arhitekta J. Pogas Birojs, Riga

Project data

Gross floor area: 16,523 m²

Building volume: 82,400 m³

Building height: 30 m

Multifunctional Center

Concert Hall of Liepaja Symphony Orchestra: 1,024 seats

Chamber Hall: 154 seats

Music School of Liepaja

Public premises: Civita Nova, Experimental Stage & Music Club, Café & Bars

Chronology

2003 International Competition, 1st Prize

2004 Adaptation Project

2006 Sketch Project

2008 Final Design – “Technical Project”

2013 Start of construction and author’s supervision

2015 Opening

Liepaja

Liepaja is famed as the “city of wind”, as the place “where the wind was born”! It lies on a peninsula on the westernmost point of Latvia between the Baltic Sea and Liepaja Lake which is connected by a waterway between the Old and New Town. Its large port, which is the only ice-free seaport on the Baltic Sea, looks back on an eventful past. Ferries running twice a week to and from New York and Halifax at the beginning of the last century testify to the city’s long-standing historical significance as a busy trading place and tourist destination. With a population of approximately 100,000, Liepaja is the third largest and best-known city in Latvia after the capital of Riga. However, Soviet occupation in 1940 put an end to the city’s period of prosperity, changing it into a so-called closed city and leaving it to fall into oblivion.

Since its accession to the EU in 2004, Latvia – and with it Liepaja – has again become one of the economically most rapidly growing Baltic regions today.

This traditional seaport is not only renowned for its amber manufacturing, but also as a centre of music and performing arts in the Baltic region. “Liepajas Dzintars” (amber from Liepaja), the biggest rock festival in Latvia takes place here, for instance. With its 131 stops, 4 manuals and over 7,000 pipes, the mechanical organ of the baroque Holy Trinity Church is one of the largest in Europe. Liepaja is home to Latvia’s only Symphony Orchestra, which is also the oldest in the entire Baltic region (established 1881).

Despite growing economic difficulties, the final completion of “Great Amber” does justice to the pride of the Latvian people in their cultural traditions as well as their will to further develop them and make them accessible to an international audience of music and architecture enthusiasts.