

The concert building as a public living room

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*The aim of this document is to reflect on the past year of graduation, in terms of research, design, themes, approach and its relation to a wider context. Besides, it substantiates the decisions I made during my design process and supports the project itself.*

With the return of conductor Sir Simon Rattle to the London Symphonic Orchestra, the debate about London's concert halls came to life again. London has several concert halls but none of them is of outstanding quality. The current musical venues do not fit the acoustic requirements of an excellent acoustic hall. That is why London is in need of a new concert hall where Rattle and the London Symphonic Orchestra can perform all music pieces. The new concert hall should suit the status of London in the world as a cultural metropolis and the capital of the United Kingdom. For that reason, a committee, led by Sir Simon Rattle, initiated a business case to design a concert hall situated at the corner of the Barbican Estate, now home to the Museum of London. My graduation project loosely follows the brief of the design contest of the new concert hall in London but I was asked to create a personal interpretation of the assignment. Where the design contest deals with investors and political interests, I was asked to emphasise with the wider context of the project.

At first I studied the design contest and the political and economic context of the situation in order to create a critical and personal view on the assignment. I looked into the political background of the design contest and researched the social status of London and The City, the district of the Barbican Estate. I became aware of the fact that the British government drew back its financial support for the concert building in 2016 because the project does not offer value for money for taxpayers. They brought up the argument that the society does not benefit enough from such an investment and the support could therefore not be justified and maintained. This is why the design contest turned into a business case financed by investors. The concert hall became a commercial project which had the main goal to satisfy its investors rather than serving the people who will use the building.

Looking at the social context, we can conclude that London is a city of contradictions: it is home to the richest and poorest people of the United Kingdom. Over the past years, the social inequality grew between the different social groups in the city. Recent studies show that the amount of households which are rich and poor is growing, while the middle class household is disappearing. London is also by far the most culturally diverse part of the country and a melting pot of ethnicities, languages, faiths and traditions, more liberal and tolerant than the rest of Britain. But this does not mean that there is also equal integration: research indicated that there is actually less social mixing by ethnicity, age and class in London than in the rest of the country.

The argument that a concert hall is not profitable for the society triggered me during my graduation because in my opinion education, health care and culture are aspects which have to be provided by the government for the society. Classical music is part of the culture scene and should therefore be stimulated by the state. I see the concert building as an opportunity to minimise the social gaps in London by creating a concert hall which serves as a public living room in the city where everyone is and more important, feels invited.

As a group we looked into precedents of concert halls, theatres and operas. During the first period we visited several concert halls in Europe in pairs which gave us material we analysed and used for our own design. Designing a concert hall is a special and honourable task for an architect and not many will have the chance to really build one during their career. The hall itself is a very precise matter when it comes to the height of the balconies, the proportions of the hall, the reverberation time and the acoustic surfaces. Through studying these precedents, I became aware of all these elements which have to be taken into account during the design process. Alongside the hall, also the foyer spaces have to be adapted to endure large amount of the visitors during a specific moment during the day. The amount of toilets or the width of the stairs have to be designed to digest these large number of people during the peak moments. Most of these notions were requirements I had never thought about before while visiting a concert or theatre play but make all the difference in the succession of the building.

The physical context of the assignment is also an element which had to be studied carefully. The site which is assigned to become the location of the new concert hall is located at the corner of the Barbican Estate, a remarkable piece of modern architectural history. The site currently houses the Museum of London which will move to their new building at the Spitalfields Market. The Barbican Estate is designed by Chamberlin, Powell and Bon in the 1970s and opened in the 1980s as one of the few housing blocks in The City. It represents strong ideas about the new modern city developed after the Second World War. The architects introduced the concept of the high walk as a raised pedestrian walkway and a podium level on which the buildings are placed. The rising of the ground floor creates an intimate world

which is closed off from the city and focuses inwards on the lake in the centre of the complex and the two residential gardens. The complex ignores the immediate surroundings with the exemption of the Museum of London at the south edge. Here, the complex tries to connect with the surrounding buildings through three bridges to the buildings on the other side of the roundabout.

Studying the Barbican made me aware of the historical relevance of the complex and the strong architectural language it has. During the design process I had to develop a certain position towards the complex and an approach in how to connect or disconnect with it. Besides, the location of the site is an opportunity to open up the Barbican and connect the area with the South walk and the St. Paul's in the South and with Old Street in the North.

During our excursion to London, we visited the Royal Festival Hall. Looking like "an egg in a box" from the outside, I had never expected such an elegant and attractive building form from the inside. The high quality of the interior spaces and the various users of the building inspired me and triggered me to study the type of the culture centre, with the Royal Festival Hall as a result, more profoundly. The type of the cultural centre had its hey days during the 60s and 70s and arose during the period after the Second World War as a product of the Welfare State. The government had the responsibility to educate their people and the idea was to do this through offering cultural accessibility. Therefore, a new building type had to be invented because the monumental architecture of the Kulturtemples of the 19th century were a presentation of the bourgeoisie cultural institutions. The new type should be highly accessible for a broad audience and challenge people to participate.

The research on the culture centre inspired me to think about the role of a public building and the public realm in the city. I looked into the terms of public space and the public sphere and came across a definition by Hannah Arendt, one of the most influential writers on the topic, who defined the public space as 'the space of appearance where people reveal themselves as active and communicating citizens'. Jürgen Habermas emphasises the democratic value of the public space by describing it as 'the realm between civil society and the state, which stands for the conditions under which public debate might become a legitimising basis for democratic political action'. Both definitions made me aware of the importance of the public space as a condition for human interaction. Public buildings are the places where citizens meet, encounter and discuss. The public space stimulates the debate, gives the citizens the feeling that they are part of the bigger community and encourages them to interact.

The ideas of the culture centre and the public sphere came up after the Second World War but to my opinion, these ideas did not lose their importance because the idea of constituting common ground for contemporary societies is still valid. The public debate and human encounter is more urgent and necessary than ever because of the increasing social and cultural divisions.

Through studying the conditions, programme, design interventions and materialisation of several culture centres, I tried to find out the requirements to create a building where everyone feels invited and had the intention to translate these requirements into my own design. At first, the building should have a various programme and function not solely as a classical music concert hall. It should accommodate places for music performance, education, meetings and art where the visitor is challenged to participate. Entrance to the building should be possible via different entrances without giving the visitor the feeling to be watched. Thirdly, the public spaces such as the foyer and cafe should be opened to the public during the day instead of only used during a concert.

As I mentioned earlier, how to react on the Barbican with its strong architectural language and specific urban plan was an important element within the design process. From the beginning I had to goal to create a building that would connect with the Barbican through the urban design but would have its own architectural language. The concert building should strengthen the Barbican complex and not dissociate itself from it, although it should be clear that it is a different form of architecture in the sense of materialisation of shape.

This resulted in the extension of the high walk at the north side of the site over the Girls School and all the way to Defoe House. Through extending the high walk, the new concert building will have a short connection with the Barbican Arts Centre. Besides, the extension strengthens all the connections with the complex because it creates three new cloisters. This small intervention opens up the Barbican with its entrance at the side of the new concert building.

The building consists out of three building volumes which together form an ensemble with a various programme. The main volume is the concert hall and foyers whereas the the volumes at the back houses the dressing rooms, building maintenance and management functions. The volume at the side of the gardes functions as a music hub, exhibition space, cafe and includes all the rehearsal rooms and hiring boxes. The volumes are split by the high walk on the first

levels and are connected with the ground floor at the South side. Entrances to the concert hall are situated at first level and at the ground floor and avoid the feeling of a monumental entrance.

Further on in the design process, we focused on the foyer spaces and the concert hall itself. The foyer spaces are occupied during the day and should accommodate different activities. They should invite citizens to study, read, discuss, meet and relax. Besides, the spaces should also suit the function of a concert hall where the public is part of the performance. That is why I designed three different staircases with each a different experience. The main foyer has three stairs which are placed behind each other. This creates a mountain where visitor climb towards their seat while being watched by other visitors. The second staircase is a spiral stairs: on each floor the stairs turns. The stairs are positioned in a different direction which creates a different view and focus point. The last staircase is designed by placing two stairs behind each other. The staircases are designed with the idea of scenography and procession. Watching and being watched is, to my opinion, part of the experience of visiting a concert and gives the visitor the feeling that they participate in society.

While working on the materialisation of the foyer spaces, I looked into the work of several Scandinavian modernistic architects and especially the work of Alvar Aalto. I have been talking about the concert building as a living room, and was inspired by the Scandinavian interiors because they try to create a domestic feeling. The interiors are built up out of layers to create a feeling of home. This domestic feeling is important in countries where the outside is not a pleasant place to stay. For that reason, I choose to clad or layer the surfaces in the interior. The floor is covered with pinkish terrazzo while the vertical surfaces are clad with grey terrazzo and light coloured wood. The light grey suspended ceiling covers the mechanical ventilation, electricity necessities, fire alarms and has integrated acoustic panels and lighting. The stairs and railings is finished with a bar made out of messing which catches the sunlight during day time.

The facade is more sober than the interior because it reacts on the offices buildings surrounding the site. The facade of the ensemble is made out of light grey Wienerberger bricks which relate to the colour of the prefab concrete pillars holding the window frames. The window frames are hidden behind these prefab concrete elements and are only expressed at the entrances. The facade works as a layer with holes in it, working as the openings to create different views and to let in daylight. The facades where the high walk slides through the ensemble have a different expression. They are build up out of the concrete prefab elements from the openings at the outer facade. This together creates a frame with equal distances and openings between the frames. I created these two different facades to create an inner and an outer world of the ensemble.

The the design of the concert hall is inspired by music notations and the rhythm and melodies of (classical) music. During the first period of the semester I studied the way how music is communicated between musicians and found different systems of music notations. Besides the common way to write music, several alternatives came up within Post-modernism. I studied these music notations in term of repetition, melody, tone and structure. After several studies and abstractions, I translated the music notations into an architectural acoustic design for the hall. This resulted in the design of an acoustic element made out of wood with applied wooden bars. The surface of the wood is covered with wooden bars, placed on different distances from each other. This creates several patterns which present the rhythm, melody and tones of music.

The executed research done during the first semester, inspired me designing a concert building which had the aim to function as a public living room. After deepening into the context and the presentation of the manager of the business case, it was clear to me that I wanted to create a building which served society rather than investors. The research on the culture centre, the public realm and the Scandinavian interiors helped my finding design requirements and an architectural language to create my proposal the public living room.

Thank you,

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