

# VOLKER GIENCKE

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

**The multifunctional complex is to be opened on November 7, 2015**

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

“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 1000 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 m<sup>2</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 as an ensemble. The acoustics were excellent!”

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## **The acoustic concept of Müller-BBM**

The grand Concert Hall has a seating capacity of over 1000. Its acoustically effective volume is around 11,200 m<sup>3</sup>. 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 1200 m<sup>3</sup>, 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 public address 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.

The high acoustic quality of the spaces and their variable usability is the result of intensive collaboration between architects of Volker Giencke's company and acoustics advisors from Müller-BBM; starting back in 2003, the competition year, and continuing throughout all service phases.

"It is a wonder, something really special that only happens once in a hundred years", is how Indulis Kalns, a well-known local architect, is said to have 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.

## **Fotos:**

GreatAmber\_Night\_M.jpg – Credit: © Aigars Prūsis

GreatAmber\_Concert Hall\_S.jpg – Credit: © Merks Ltd.

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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 Technician:** 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 - Astra & Juris Poga, Riga

## Project data

Gross floor area: 16,523 m<sup>2</sup>

Building volume: 82,400 m<sup>3</sup>

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, 1<sup>st</sup> Prize

2004 Adaptation Project

2006 Sketch Project

2008 Final Design

2010 Final Design, Detailed Planning – “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.