

Filharmonia in Szczecin, Poland by Estudio Barozzi Veiga

18 March 2015 | By [Rob Wilson](#)



Wrapped in a gauzily translucent skin, Barozzi Veiga's Filharmonia is a ghostly and austere insertion in a variegated Polish townscape

On a bright but overcast winter day, the Szczecin Filharmonia's white facade, with its vertical texture of profiled anodised aluminium, looks particularly ethereal, its distinctive headdress of almost cartoon-like spiked gables beginning to merge into the flat white of the sky.

It is the strange, still, insubstantiality of this new building's presence that perversely makes it stand out so strongly in the city of Szczecin, where the main warp and weft of the streets are still dominated by attenuated red-brick neo-Gothic and over-scaled Wilhelmine-era neo-Renaissance public buildings. Further out, a contrasting mix of system-built postwar slab-block housing, circles large swathes of stolidly intact streets of six-storey apartment blocks, dating from when the city was part of Imperial Germany - its third biggest port after Hamburg and Bremen - sitting as it does at the mouth of the Oder where it exits onto the Baltic Sea.

Indeed this Janus-faced identity mix reflects the key dramatic fact of Szczecin's 20th-century history: in 1945, at the end of the Second World War, with the redrawing of borders, it passed from being a German city to a Polish one. This saw its German population, which had numbered around 400,000 before the war, being expelled and replaced by Poles, many themselves uprooted from an area of pre-war eastern Poland annexed by the Soviet Union.

The four-storey, 12,000 square metre Filharmonia, with a Symphony Hall for 1,000 people and Chamber Hall for 200, is the first major public building commissioned in the city for 30 years. The 2007 design competition for it was won by Barcelona-based architects Barozzi Veiga - its principals Fabrizio Barozzi and Alberto Veiga.

The project signalled the desire of a city, once famous for shipbuilding, to redefine itself, post industrial decline, by widening its cultural agenda for tourists, as well as the many Germans living nearby across

the border, who already come to shop for cheaper goods and services. It is a redefinition that seems to be being echoed now in a more ad hoc way across the city, with nascent hipster-esque coffee bars starting to pop up, like the first buds of gentrification.

The building sits in an area heavy with history, occupying the site of its Wilhelmine-era predecessor, a hulking neo-Classical Konzerthaus destroyed by bombing in the Second World War. On its eastern side, it abuts a gabled neo-Gothic police station, the Gestapo headquarters during the Nazi period, but also the place from which police shot dead a schoolgirl in 1970 in the adjacent square - one death among around 20 in the city at the time - during protests against food price rises which had spread through northern Poland.

These key anti-Communist protests, 10 years before the more celebrated strikes and civil resistance of the Solidarity shipyard union in Gdansk, are the central events, alongside other aspects of the city's traumatic rollercoaster ride of 20th-century history, that are being commemorated in a second, new public building for the city, The Centre for Dialogue, due to open in the adjacent square. Designed by KWK Promes, whose principal is Robert Konieczny, better known for his James-Bond style houses for Poland's newly rich, this new centre actually sits relatively self-effacingly under the square itself, the surface of which rears up at two corners to accommodate it. The entrance to the new Filharmonia addresses what is a fairly anodyne public space, lined with a few trees and backing at the far side onto one of the massive multi-lane roads that still blight the city centre.

On its other two elevations, the Filharmonia presents one blank flank to a large boulevard-type street, while at its back, its service-facade is served by a tight delivery yard, shielded from a small park by a wall. Despite the clear hierarchy in importance of the three facades, they are all treated similarly, their stepped and recessed surfaces all similarly wrapped in a skin of vertically textured white anodised aluminium profiles, interspersed with milky glass strips - behind which integral

lighting allows for the building's skin to be lit internally at night. Relieved by only a handful of voids puncturing the skin - the main entrance and three big picture windows, serving upper circulation spaces - the overall impression of the building is one of almost shocking whiteness and blankness, although this starkness will be softened in summer by the surrounding green of trees. This blanket treatment around the building, reinforces the aesthetic of its seeming to have a single thin wrap-around skin, one that sometimes looks milky and ethereal, at other times a bit like sheets of corrugated plastic packaging. The almost 2D sense of the facades is underlined by the most expressive features of the building's exterior: the series of almost toy-town gables which top and animate it, reminiscent of a paper hat from a cracker. The architects cite how this was designed to echo the steep 'Germanic' gables in the city, intentionally picking up on what Alberto Veiga describes as the 'specifics of the city' in the building's public face, prioritising this over any expression of the function of the Philharmonic Hall itself. 'We wanted - as in music - to reinterpret Classical morphology, to compose something complex, but with very simple movements that can be understood by everybody.'

The roof's graphic gables read more like steep house eaves - like an exaggerated and simplified image of a Hanseatic League City - bleached out but familiar, like but unlike: an *unheimlich* abstraction that is slightly comic but seductive and refreshing and a deliberate riposte to the over-representational pomp cluttering up the facades of so many other public buildings in the city. More subtly, with its ridged profiled texture, and bold silhouette, stabbing heavenward, there are also references to the spindly verticality of northern Gothic, seen in many local churches.

The gables are not actually the cut-out FAT-like ones they first appear, but actually express the complexity of the building's ridged roofscape, similarly covered in the same white profiling, meaning the building has inevitably been compared to an iceberg, but also, when seen from the air, is reminiscent of a ridged molar tooth.

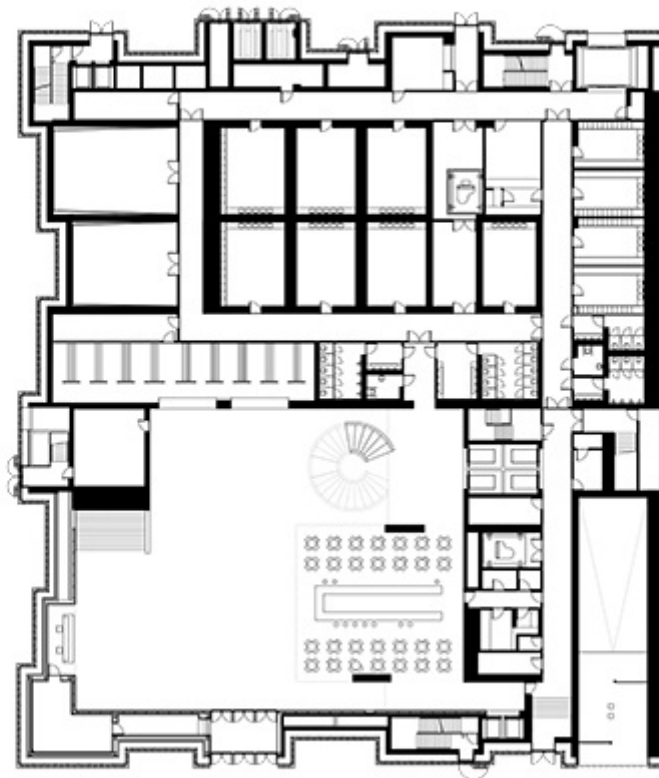


When lit from inside, the skin of anodised aluminium and glass resembles a paper lantern against an overcast sky

On entering, you pass through a small draught lobby, revealing the unexpected depth of the facade - its apparent screen-like nature revealed as actually a stuffed crust of services - and then onto the main lobby which surprises in its sheer scale, rising the full height of the building. It feels enormous, Tardis-like after the scrambled, difficult-to-pinpoint scale of the featureless facade topped by its vaguely domestic gables. There is again a sense of church-like verticality, with the eye led up to the roof, where the main source of natural light comes in through skylights. The white theme continues, even intensifies, with the inner skin seeming an inversion of the exterior, white anodised profiled aluminium strips, although this time interspersed with black

acoustic insulation: in visual effect creating the slight optical buzz of a Bridget Riley painting.

The square metrage of the lobby space was achieved in plan by parallel parking the two main concert halls up to one side. At the rear, the main Symphony Hall rises through three storeys from first floor level, sitting on and ringed by rehearsal and backstage rooms, with further service rooms further down in the basement (shared also with two layers of sub-grade parking). On the right, the volume of the smaller Chamber Hall, also at first floor level, hovers over the cafeteria. Meanwhile, bridging across the top of the lobby at fourth floor level, between the lightwells serving the skylights, is a gallery, off which sit the main administrative offices.



Floor plans - click to expand

The space of the lobby is purposely generous: Veiga talks of it as being the 'lobby of the city', forming a flexible public space, open and accessible all day, even when there are no events in the concert halls. (On the Saturday I visited it was hosting a children's music workshop.) There are also DJ sets and gigs planned to be held there, drawing a wider range of audiences into the building, while in addition, a projector, due to be fitted above the entrance, will beam information or transform the space into a cinema at night.

The elements of the space stand out graphically: a dark slot in the wall to the left houses the reception, which sits at the base of a grandly wide flight of stairs leading straight up to the Symphony Hall's main entrance. Ahead two further slots house the cloakroom, while to the right a spiral stair, like an expressive broken cylinder, works its way up to serve both concert halls, with lifts and lavatories beyond. Veiga describes the whole as a space 'designed for movement' which, though looking insistently orthogonal on plan, is experientially dynamic in section.

However with its vast whiteness, there is a hardness to the space, the black shapes of people almost seeming to mess with its aesthetics, like interruptions on the pure expanse of its white terrazzo floor. In the interval of a performance, with a stream of people descending the spiral stair for a drink at the bar, the experience looked more akin to the regimentation of an Oskar Schlemmer-painting than the sensuousness of the Paris Opéra. For even with hundreds of people in it, the space is so grand that it remains more akin to a chilly Grand Central Station than city living room.

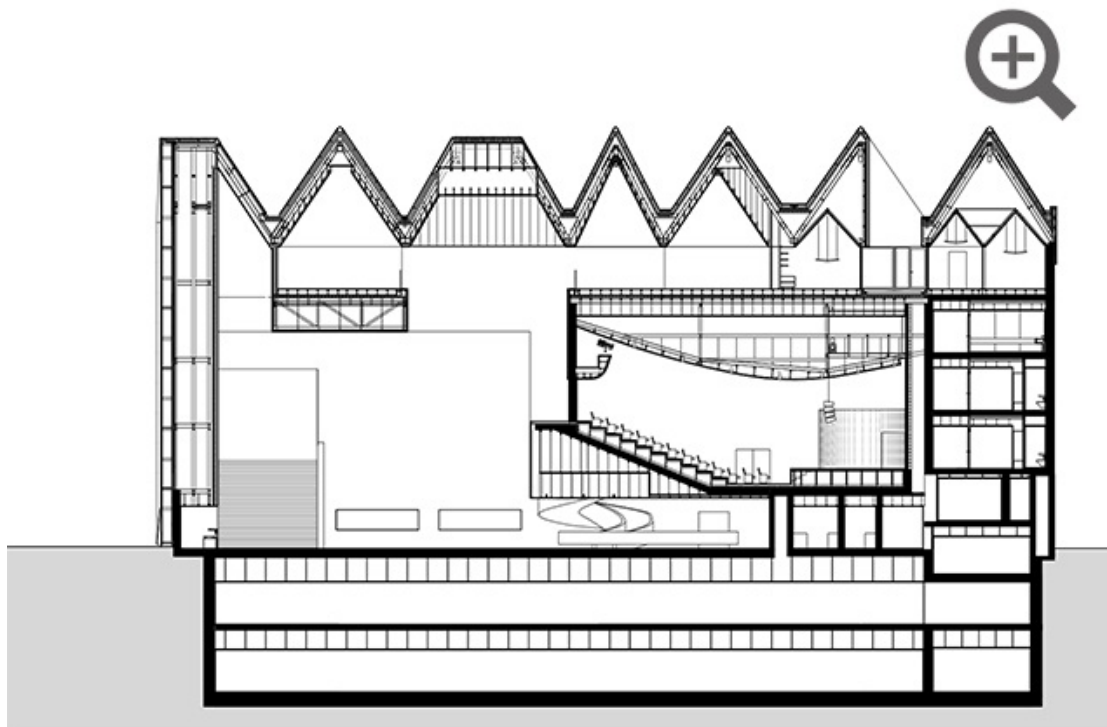


The Symphony Hall's ceiling is composed of dramatic facets, blending acoustic performance with spatial drama

Most particularly this chill is felt during the day, the lack of real permeability of the lobby to the outside - a permeability weirdly promised by the screen-like perception of the facade - meaning the café area in the undercroft to the Chamber Hall has to have its lights on all day (they even lit candles on my table while I was having a morning coffee there). This seems to have been a missed opportunity to break the building's austerity and open out to the square, visually - even physically during the summer - while still not compromising the dominant emphasis on skylight in the entrance lobby. It is a space which seems too cut off from the life of the city, set up as a separate rival idea of 'public space' off the square, rather than a real extension of it.

Moving further up through the building, the over-insistent whiteness continues in the upper lobbies and bar, another case one suspects of an architectural idea dominating over experience, maintained primarily to act as a foil to the dramatic richness of entering the rectangular

Symphony Hall. Also known as the 'Sun Hall', here gold cakes its every surface, with gilded walls composed of faceted geometric reliefs. Again the most drama is reserved for the top regions: an extraordinary acoustic ceiling, which is even more deeply faceted and fissured to the point of being almost crystalline, developed with acoustician Higiní Arau, and based on the Fibonacci sequence. This is thrown into further dramatic relief during the day, by, unusually for a contemporary concert hall, two skylights letting in natural light at each end.



Sections - click to expand

Barozzi Veiga cites early 20th-century expressionism, and the 'central European tradition of the classical concert halls decoration becomes ornament and function', as an inspiration behind this highly articulated ceiling in the Symphony Hall, and it feels reminiscent, if not in detail then in idea and overarching presence of Hans Poelzig's legendary ceiling in his long since destroyed Grosses Schauspielhaus in Berlin, designed in 1919.

'We started to work with the idea of surface, with the idea of natural light, how to transmit something, an experience, with light, combining this with the acoustics', says Veiga.

The hall's ceiling is a particularly inspired and deeply satisfying element, generated haptically by and expressive of two senses, and simultaneously creating a sense of occasion and grandeur in the space, while providing a warm, intimate heaven over it all.

Across in the Chamber Hall meanwhile, visually distinct again - a study in black and silver with its firmament-like ceiling with small star-like lights - the acoustics are allegedly even better, although this is a more workaday, sealed box-type space and one which can usefully also be hired out for conferences and seminars.

This emphasis on the ceilings in the concert halls picks up again on a running theme in the building: the concentration of drama in the vertical, heavenward. This animation at ceiling level echoes and makes sense as the lining to the equally expressive roof outside - which on reflection could equally be said to channel Hans Poelzig-like imagery: the exaggerated pitched roofs in the sets he designed for the 1920 film *Der Golem*, a sort of fairy-tale idea of northern European Gothic.

This building is a study in deliberate contrasts, between the almost visceral hapticity of the Symphony Hall's ceiling and its ghostly, deliberately austere face to the world. And while these contrasts seem over-drawn at times - the emphasis seeming to be more on an experiential idea in spaces such as the lobby than actual practical day-to-day use - the underlying intention of the architects to 'try to transmit feeling' through the architecture is very successfully and impressively achieved in what is an exceptionally memorable building.

Philharmonic Hall

Architect: Estudio Barozzi Veiga

Lighting: Anoche

Acoustics: Arau Acustica

Photographs: Simon Menges