

Music in the Air

Those who are not put off by the outer appearance of the new music palace in Utrecht find a temptation-filled temple inside

Arthur Wortmann

Herman Hertzberger is now 82, but age did not stop him from realizing one of his most interesting buildings. What's more: TivoliVredenburg, a music theatre that officially opened in Utrecht on 21 June, is literally and figuratively the pinnacle of his *oeuvre*. Literally, because it's on top of his 1978 masterpiece, the Vredenburg Music Centre – and figuratively, because it shows just how well he's managed to reinvent himself over the course of his career.

The old Vredenburg Music Centre reflected Hertzberger's leanings towards the small-scaled and the informal. Although the Grand Hall seated 1,700, the audience was separated into small groups. And by putting the stage at the middle of the space, Hertzberger kept sightlines short and gave the octagonal hall an intimate atmosphere. Surrounding the hall and spread over three floors was the foyer: a labyrinth of small passages, niches and cosy seating areas. 'If you lose sight of someone there in the interval,' the architect once said, 'you'll never find them again.' The materials he used – prefabricated concrete skeleton; concrete-brick walls; wood panelling, floors and furniture – were anything but chic. The building may not have been appreciated by one and all, but it was recognized immediately as a symbol of the times and as a manifesto of structuralist architecture. And everyone agreed about the acoustics in the Grand Hall: they were excellent.

Less than 25 years later, Vredenburg became a plaything in a game of uncontrollable political eruptions. Emerging throughout the Netherlands around the turn of the century were populist political parties that based their viewpoints not on ideology but on public opinion. One such party, Leefbaar Utrecht, virtually came out of nowhere in 2000 to win 14 of the 45 seats up for grabs in Utrecht's municipal elections. That party no longer exists, but one of its major achievements, in 2002, was the introduction of a popular referendum on the development of the station area. In theory, the referendum made good sense. Utrecht's station area is one of the Netherlands' uglier spots. It's next to impossible to get your bearings there, in the midst of large-scale new-build projects that clash with centuries-old alleyways. Heavy traffic and pervasive commercial flamboyance complete the picture. The referendum offered voters a choice between two plans: a relatively inexpensive 'practical' plan and a more costly yet more 'enjoyable' plan. One of the many aspects of the former was the demolition of Vredenburg, whereas the latter earmarked only *parts* of the music centre for demolition and allowed for the preservation of the Grand Hall. Of the 65 per cent of the local population that went to the polls, over 70 per cent voted for the 'enjoyable' plan – most likely citizens who preferred the proposed traffic system. The fact that parts of the municipality-owned music centre would be preserved was coincidental.

Hertzberger could do nothing other than acknowledge the state of affairs, but given the opportunity to redesign and extend the building, he accepted the offer. The brief asked for a 'music palace' to be occupied by three players: the old Vredenburg, Tivoli (an existing pop-music venue that was causing noise pollution in another part of town) and jazz centre SJU. The idea was to unite different types of music within a single building. A complicating factor was the presence of two architects who were already involved in plans for the pop-music venue and the jazz centre: Jo Coenen and Thijs Asselbergs, respectively. While showing us around the new building prior to the grand opening, Hertzberger – accompanied by studio partner and fellow architect Patrick Fransen – explained that the involvement of Coenen and Asselbergs had led to the idea of combining the work and making it a collaborative project. Hertzberger's practice, Architectuurstudio HH, would be responsible for supervising the project, for renovating the Grand Hall and for adding a hall for

chamber music. Other halls were to be designed by other architects and to be given a place within the new entity. Hertzberger: 'When a "crossover" hall was added to the programme, it seemed logical to look for a fourth architect rather than to design it ourselves. That task went to NL Architects.'

The municipality's desire to unite different parties – some more reluctant than others – under one roof was embraced with more and more enthusiasm as the process went on. Although the initial concept comprised a number of halls seen as individual realms, another idea gradually emerged: cooperative interaction among all players had its advantages. Ultimately, each hall was to have its own signature while not being strictly limited to one type of music. A programme based on the revised concept could include festivals in which various halls would be used by the same audiences. The organization of the crossover hall illustrates this synergy. In the words of NL Architects: 'The central idea is to connect. The crossover hall reaches out to the other halls, stretching in all directions, creating a kind of star shape. The main entrance is on top of the pop venue. One of the balconies creates a direct link to the jazz hall. The foyers of the crossover and chamber music halls can be connected to form one space.'

Today's visitor doesn't realize all this as he approaches the building. From the outside, the new TivoliVredenburg looks like a conceptual industrial accident. There it stands, too big for its boots, and it's not instantly comprehensible either. What is it? Which side is the front and which is the back? Where's the entrance? It has a 45-m-high roof that seems to tie it all together – a gesture of coherency – but what about those volumes that jut from the façade here and there? At ground level, a large part of the old music centre completely escapes the sphere of influence cast by the high roof. And what about all those round holes puncturing the east and west sides of the building?

All such doubts vanish, however, when you enter TivoliVredenburg. You walk into a building to find a world opening before your eyes. The 'entrance street', which connects the building's two entrances, forms a transition zone between the cosy foyer of the restored Vredenburg and the overwhelming spaciousness of the extension. In the ten-storey-high entrance hall, your eye is automatically drawn to the tangled tracery of stairs, escalators and platforms above. This overhead maze avoids being hallucinatory, owing to a rather 'corporate' use of materials, but you must admit it's as if Piranesi had been given the chance to design the atrium of a shopping centre.

The complexity of the entrance hall is a consequence of the project's equally complicated logistics. Stacked one atop the other, the five music venues have to function independently and thus require separate routing to a certain degree. During festivals, though, they have to operate in combination with one another and thus need to be connected. A 'music plaza', located at a height of 24 m, is crucial to the access of the three halls above it. The plaza can be partitioned into screened-off areas that can be rented out independently – to help pay for managing and maintaining the building. To accommodate temporary tenants, the building must be suitable not only for musical performances but also for activities such as congresses, music fairs, product presentations, television shows, receptions and dinners. Large freight lifts – obviously available in a ten-storey music theatre – allow these tenants to install their own equipment in the spaces they've rented or to transform them with furnishings brought in from outside.

The most important elements of TivoliVredenburg are, of course, the music halls. Audiences invited to the try-out concerts seemed to love the auditoriums and the acoustics. The Grand Hall, now restored, has lost none of its old charm. Ronda, the pop-rock venue designed by Jo Coenen, is a hemispheric space in which the audience is close to the performers and where tiered flooring and a balcony make for good sightlines. NL Architects' crossover hall, Pandora, is a black box with two loges and several informal spots for socializing. A wooden floor adds to the warm ambience of jazz venue Cloud Nine, realized by Architectuurcentrale Thijs Asselbergs, which provided the space

with an attractive 'club' that offers a view over the old city centre. Like Ronda, the hall for chamber music is hemispheric, and like Cloud Nine, it features a considerable amount of timber. The name of the hall – Hertz – is clearly a tribute to its architect.

TivoliVredenburg is a music palace that cost €150 million and is subsidized annually to the tune of €7.5 million, half of which pays for the rent and the other half for management and maintenance. Revenues come from ticket sales (the programme includes approximately 800 concerts a year), third-party rental charges, and hospitality facilities – the building has some 30 bars that are supplied in part by a 20,000-litre beer tank in the basement.

At the outset, the various stakeholders in the new organization had concerns about the financial operations of the complex. The pop-music people didn't like the idea of having 'their' revenues used to keep the traditionally unprofitable classical music afloat. As integration continues, however, such sentiments are fading. In an interview published in a Dutch newspaper, director Frans Vreeke stressed that TivoliVredenburg would do everything possible to make classical music hip: 'It won't be long before youngsters know where to find this building. We'll rein them in with pop music and then expose them to other genres during special events and festivals.'

If Vreeke succeeds, more power to him. If he doesn't, the building will not be to blame. It's prepared to host a jam-packed programme that won't lead concertgoers leaving the building through a deserted shopping mall-like atrium but through a dynamic ten-storey foyer where temptation lurks behind every door.

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