

Work Begins on Helsinki Music Center Project

By Dr. Yasuhisa Toyota

Nagata Acoustics has begun work on a new concert hall project, Helsinki Music Center, in Finland's capital city. The center will have a hall designed for orchestral music with a seat count of approximately 1,800 seats. When completed, it will become the new home of both of Helsinki's orchestras, the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra and the Helsinki Philharmonic. In addition, Finland's national music university, "Sibelius Academy", will be located in the new music center, which will also be designed to include a variety of practice rooms to accommodate the needs of students of many musical genres.

Project Site

The Helsinki Music Center site is located among other important cultural institutions and near the seat of the national government. The site is adjacent to Finlandia Hall (Alvar Aalto, architect), the current home of the two Helsinki orchestras, on one side, and next to the Museum of Modern Art (Steven Holl, architect) at its other end. Just a street away from the front of these buildings stands Finland's national parliament building.

Funding

The project's funding comes from its three owners, the Finnish national government, the city of Helsinki, and the Finnish Broadcasting Company. The Finnish national government is responsible for 50% of the budget, with Helsinki City and the Finnish Broadcasting Company responsible for 25% each.

Architectural Design Competition Process

Given the national funding and status of this project, the architect selection process began with an international open design competition. The design criteria were published in March 1999. The competition process followed a unique method, which included two rounds of design submissions. A certain number of outstanding designs were selected from the competition's first round. Then, the competition proceeded to its second round, but participation in this round was not limited to the architects whose designs had been selected in round one. Instead, all of the architects who had submitted designs in round one were allowed to submit a new design to the competition's round two. To my knowledge, this is a novel approach to the competition process.

After the completion of the first round of the competition, all of the participating architects had the opportunity to benefit from a more precise understanding of the selection committee's preferences and their interpretation of the project's scope. Therefore, the second round of the competition could be expected to produce more substantive design submissions. In round two, participating architects were free to submit designs that bore no resemblance to the designs they submitted in round one.

This unprecedented competition process created a level playing field and broadened the participants' chances to submit not only their best work, but also designs specifically targeted to appeal to the selection committee. However, I think it should also be recognized that this kind of selection process places a huge burden of work and expense on the architects who choose to participate in both rounds of a competition.

The Architectural Design Competition, Rounds One and Two

The submission period for the first round of the architectural design competition closed in August 1999. In November, the selection committee announced its choice of six outstanding designs, together with a design review of each of them. In January 2000, the selection committee published the second round's criteria, with a submission deadline of April 2000. The selection committee announced its final decision two months later, in June 2000. The first round of the competition received 247 design submissions. Round two received 71 submissions.

The Competition Selection Committee

The competition's selection committee included local architectural experts, representatives from each of the three project funders (the national government, Helsinki City government, and the Finnish Broadcasting Company), and representatives from the orchestras and Sibelius Academy who will occupy the center, perform and study there. In total, the selection committee numbered 19 people. In addition, 9 advisors were designated to provide input on the design submissions.

Nagata Acoustics served as an advisor to the selection committee, assisting the committee in understanding the acoustical implications of the design submissions under consideration. Following the conclusion of the competition, the selection committee has continued to retain Nagata Acoustics to engineer the new music center's acoustical design and perform all of the acoustical consulting responsibilities required for this concert hall project.

Finnish Architect Wins the Design Competition

The ultimate winner of the project's architectural design competition was the Finnish firm Laiho-Pullkinen-Raunio. Laiho-Pullkinen-Raunio is an architectural design firm of some 20 employees, and has its offices in Turku, Finland's second largest city, located about 160 km (99 miles) west of Helsinki.



Figure 1: Architects; Mr. Laiho, Mr. Pullkinen, Mr. Kivisto



Figure 2: Selected Exterior Design

Helsinki Music Center Project's Next Steps

The project's funders and the architect are eager to move forward, and meetings to finalize specifics of the design began as quickly as this October. However, the planned site of the project is land where some old warehouse buildings now stand. In the past, during Helsinki's brief summer period, the people of the city used these warehouse buildings as a popular marketplace and social destination. Because of this, some city residents oppose the dismantling of the old warehouses and a protest group has already formed to oppose the Helsinki Music Center project's use of this site. The project's schedule will surely see a number of permutations and revisions as work gets underway.