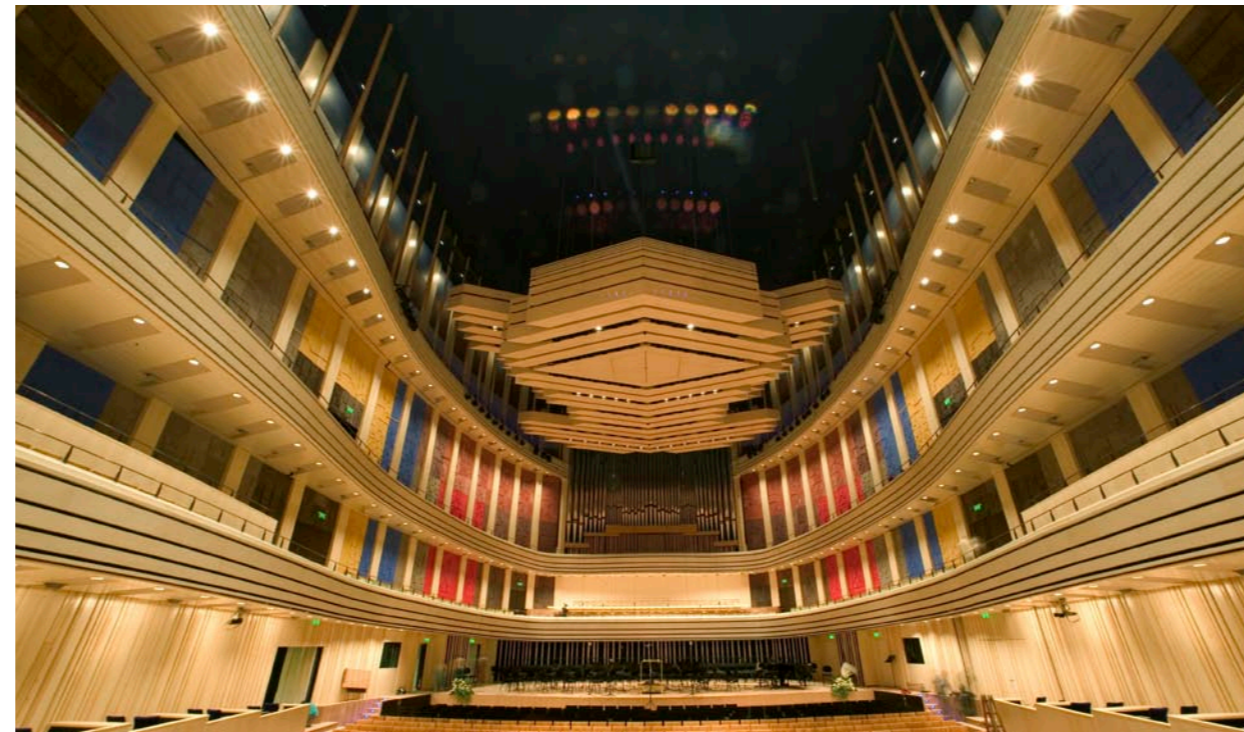
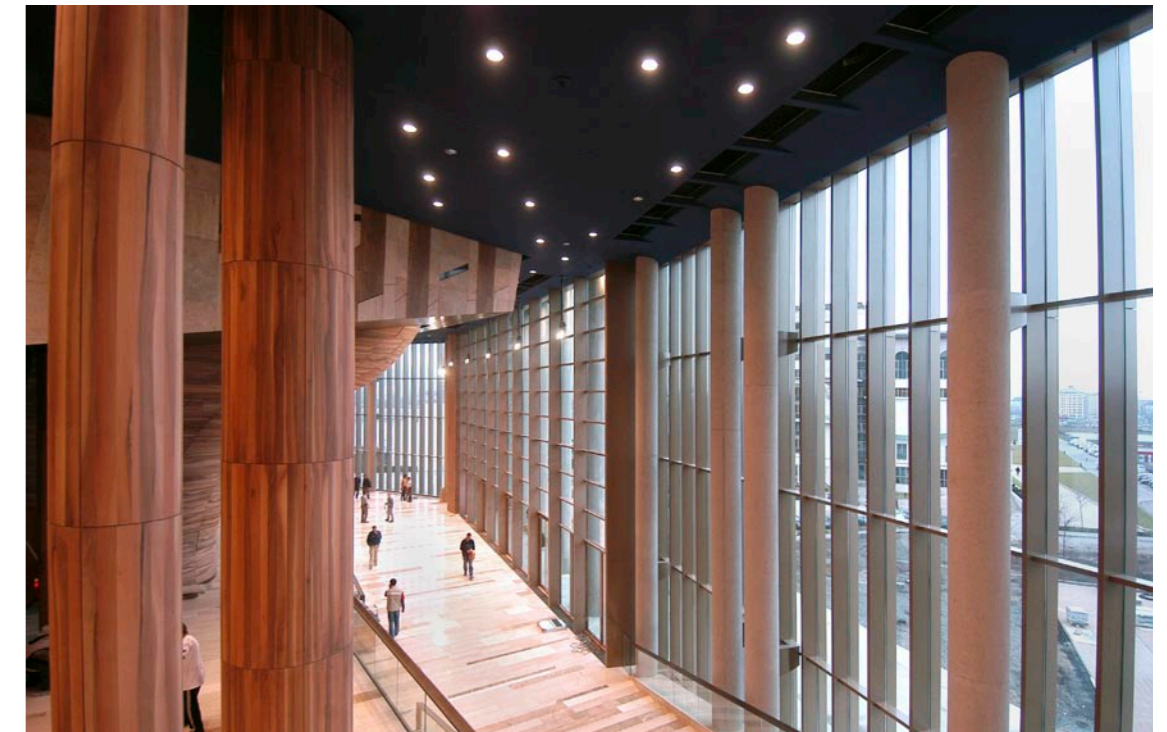




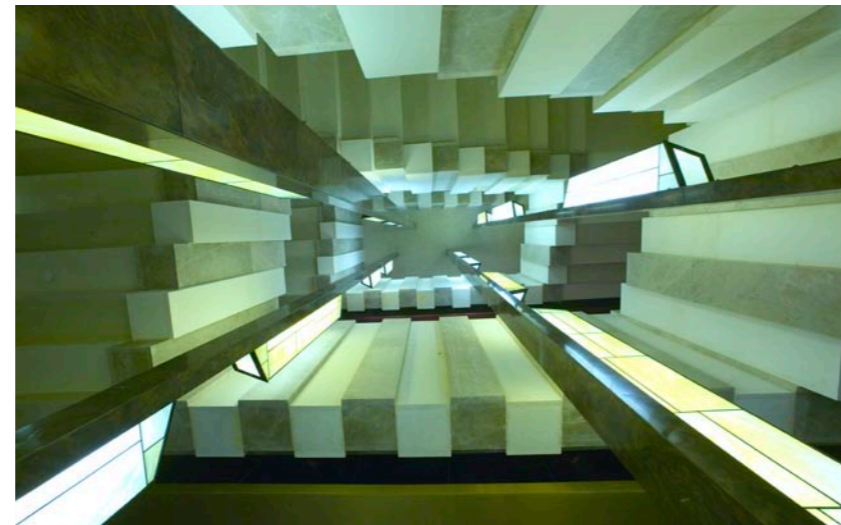
↑ The Festival Theatre with walnut clad walls.



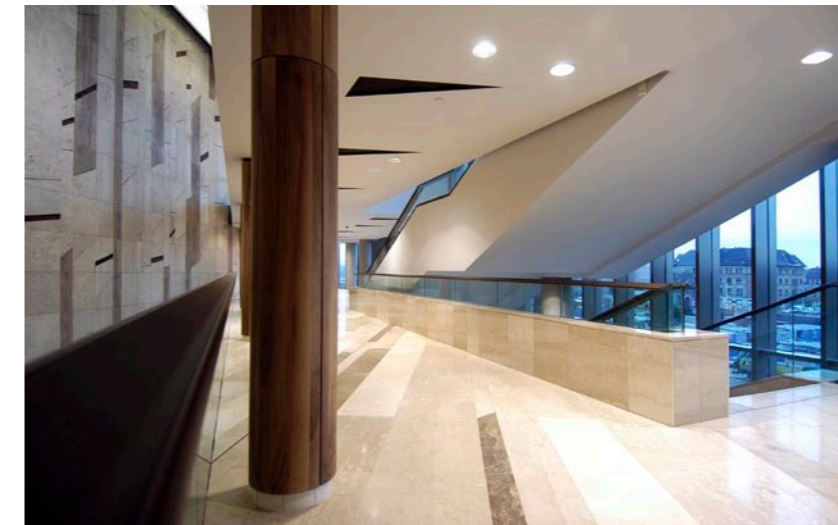
↑ Philharmonic Hall



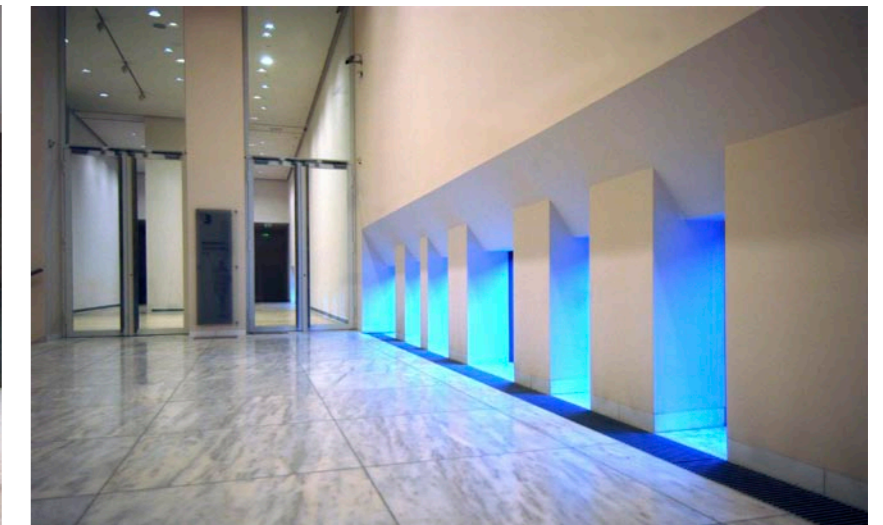
↑ The spacious foyer, with the Philharmonic Hall on the left.



↓ The decorated staircases, which are located on either side of the Philharmonic Hall.



↑ The stairs and walls in the foyer are clad with natural stone.



↑ Hallway of the Ludwig Museum

Palace of the Arts, Budapest

Zoboki, Demeter & Associates put the Ludwig Museum, National Philharmonic Hall and Festival Theatre under one roof, while giving each institute a distinct identity.

HUNGARY — TEXT: EMIEL LAMERS

Directly across from the controversial new National Theatre built in 2002 to a design by Mária Siklós, an arts complex covering more than 64,000 m² has just been completed in Budapest's aspiring 'New City Centre'. The design is by 42-year-old architect Gábor Zoboki, an ardent music lover and amateur conductor. The project was developed by a public-private partnership between TriGránit Development Corporation and the Hungarian Ministry of Cultural Heritage. The private developer invested 132 million euros in the project and is now leasing the complex to the Hungarian state, which has contracted to pay back the investment amount plus interest within 30 years. In 2000, TriGránit organized a competition for the site and awarded the design commission to the relatively young practice of Zoboki, Demeter & Associates.

Early on in his career, Zoboki gained experience with the East-West Business Centre in Pest which he designed in the early 1990s with the then 70-year-old Lajos Zalaváry. His current working partner, Nóra Demeter, joined the practice in 1993.

Initially the practice was commissioned only to design new premises for the Museum of Contemporary Art, previously housed in the castle on Buda's Castle Hill. During the design process, the National Dance Theatre, also located on Castle Hill, joined the project.

At the same time, the classical music community was lobbying hard for a new national concert hall to augment the splendid Ferenc Liszt Music Academy where the seating capacity was only 1100 and the stage too small to accommodate a full symphony orchestra. Thus it was that the commission gradually turned into a 'Palace of the Arts' with three institutes under one roof.

In the interior Zoboki's desire to give each institute a distinct identity by way of differences in form, materials and decoration has led in places to a superfluity of means. On the outside the architect manages to achieve greater unity in the design with the help of the foyer elevation and tall pergola. Zoboki himself regrets that the triangular entrance awning did not survive the cost-cutting. The natural stone facade cladding, the tall columns and wide stairways give the

building a timeless presence reminiscent of the large-scale public buildings of the 1950s and '60s.

The backbone of the building lies along the approach to Lágymányosi Bridge, the most southerly bridge in the centre of the city. For acoustic reasons the elevation along this busy road is almost completely imperforate. Zoboki's initial idea to turn it into one long advertising wall did not survive the design process. Directly behind this wall are the dressing and practice rooms, performers' foyer, rear and side stages. The dance and concert halls back onto this technical zone.

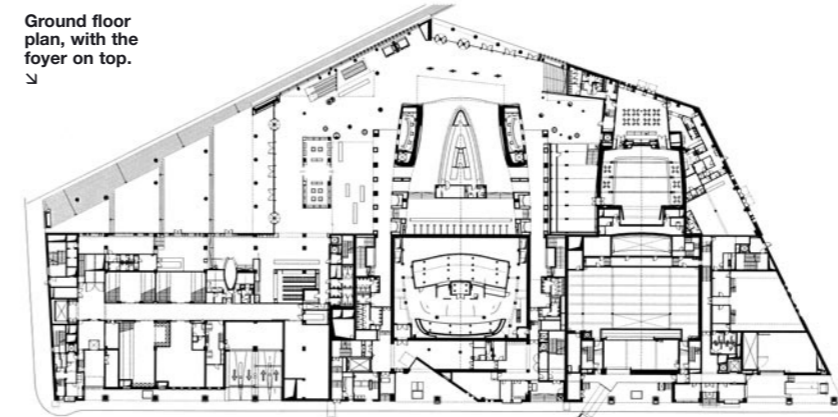
All the public foyer areas are at the front of the building where the view of the Danube and Gellért Hill is unfortunately partially blocked by the neoclassical national theatre and a huge artwork in the form of a brick ziggurat.

The Ludwig Museum is located at the end of the building, beside the Danube. Yet despite the potentially fine view of the river, the stone outer wall is once again imperforate, but for three small windows. The museum management did not want any natural light in the

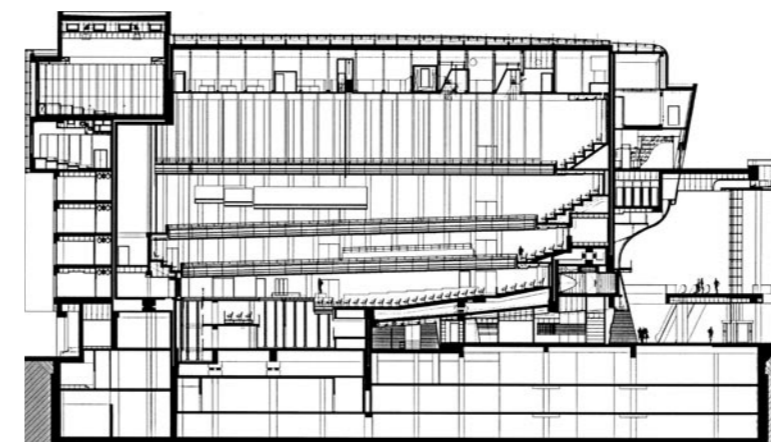
display rooms and according to Zoboki there were no other functions on this side of the building requiring daylight. At entrance level is a high, multi-purpose space hung with six modern chandeliers.

The museum itself consists of three floors, two for the permanent collection and one for temporary exhibitions. The sense of calm in this part of the building would almost make you think that it had been designed by a different architect. The rooms are orthogonal, all the walls are plastered in off-white and the floor is of light-coloured marble and laminate. The three levels are connected by a stately marble staircase.

The Philharmonic Hall, which can accommodate 1900 people, is in the middle of the building. This fifty-metre-long hall is Zoboki's personal favourite. He designed it together with Artec, an American acoustics consultancy headed by Russel Johnson. The hall has the proportions of a shoebox and is twice as long as it is wide. This rigid volume is softened by curved balconies clad with Canadian maple. Eighty-four reverberation chambers, a movable wooden reflective ceiling above



↓ Section, with the foyer on the right and the 'technical backbone' on the left.

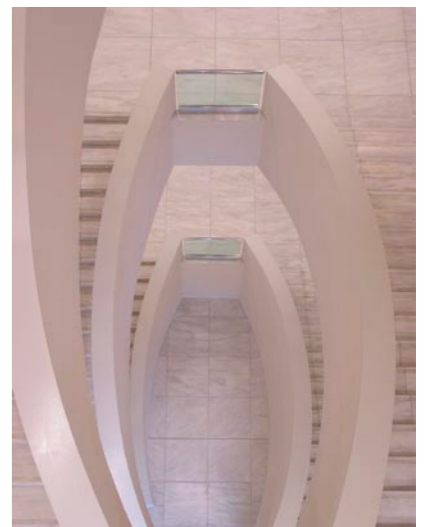


of the orchestra and the wooden balcony fronts ensure optimal acoustics.

Compared with the imposing concert hall, the 450-seat Festival Theatre has a much more intimate atmosphere. The walls are clad with dark stained walnut and the ceiling with European redwood. The upholstery of the seats is in several shades of red and dark purple. To make the theatre suitable for large productions, the stage opening can be widened and the stage extended at the expense of the first row of seats.

The developers (and the city council) have visions of the area around the complex becoming a 'new city centre'. Quite apart from the question of whether a new centre can be created with a few new buildings, the spatial connections between these ambitious buildings leave (as yet) a lot to be desired.

The excellent cooperation between different disciplines inside the complex is not mirrored by an equally good cooperation at urban planning level outside. Paths and roads between the buildings do not connect up and there is no unity of materials. Public transport links to the 'old' centre are also far from ideal. Instead of the pretentious 'New City Centre', it would be better to speak of a more down-to-earth 'New Cultural District'. For the time being it's a matter of waiting to see whether enough art-lovers find their way to this new district and take it to their hearts as they have the Buda area or Franz Liszt Square. ←



↑ The Ludwig Museum's marble staircase



PALACE OF THE ARTS, 2000–2005

Architect: Zoboki, Demeter and associates
Interior architects: Technoart Kft., Studio G.
Client: Ministry of Cultural Heritage
Address: Komor Marcell utca 1, 1453 Budapest
Info: www.mupa.hu, www.zoboki-demeter.hu