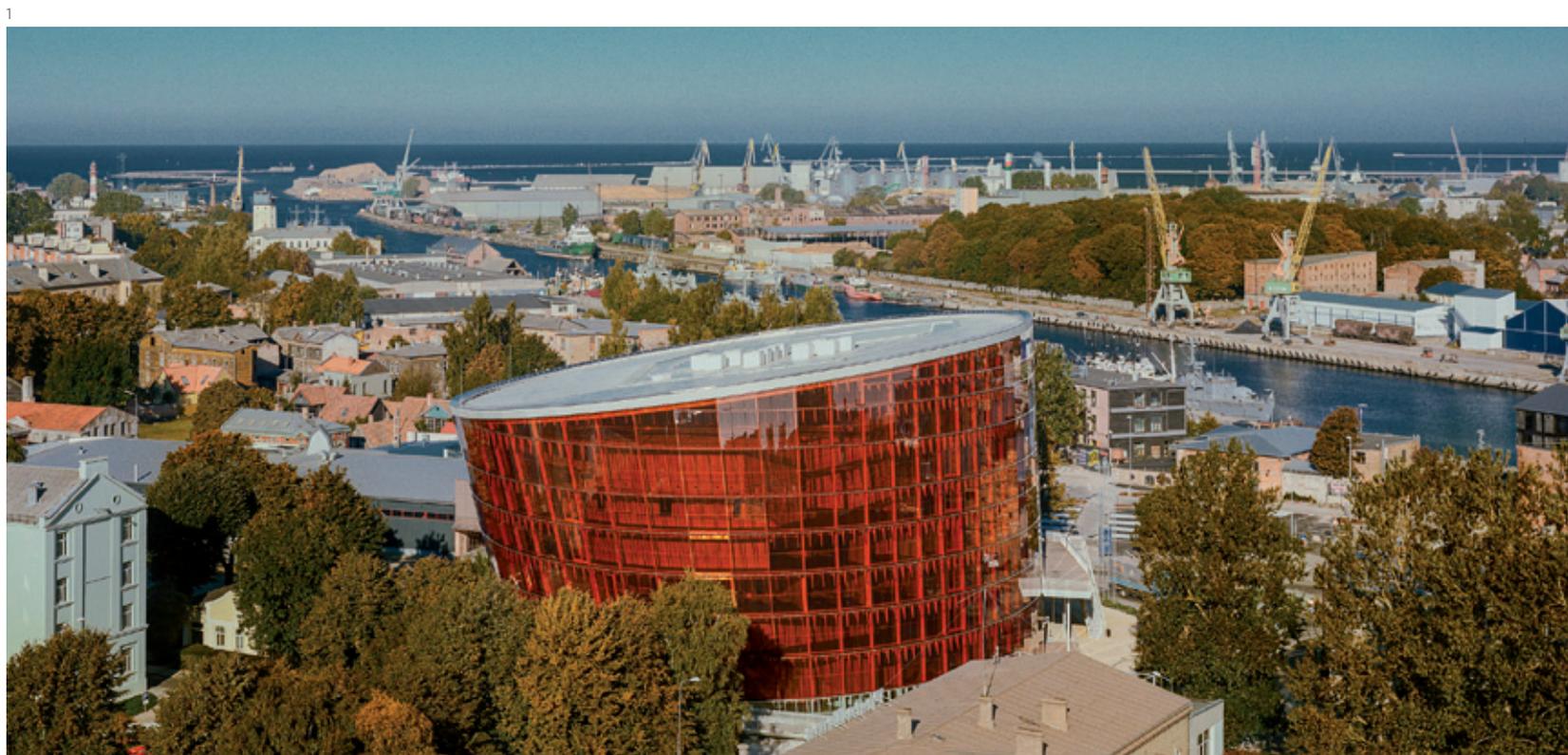


## PROJECT

### Great Amber Hall, Liepāja / Giencke and Company



A new concert hall on Latvia's Baltic coast opens a once-closed town to the world, and visually celebrates amber, the regional gemstone. It has also given Austrian architect Volker Giencke an opportunity to realise exceptional ideas of form and light. *Herbert Wright* reports



The ice-free port of **Liepāja** in Latvia was once a closed military town, home to a submarine squadron of the **Soviet Baltic Fleet**. Now, it is home to the **Great Amber Hall**, a spectacular new venue which includes a central, 1,024-capacity concert auditorium. Designed by the Graz-based practice **Giencke and Company**, it opened in October with a performance by the **Berlin Philharmonic String Quartet** in its second auditorium, the 180-capacity Chamber Music Hall.

The building's form is essentially a six-storey, conical volume tapering outward to a flat, sloping roof and wrapped in a transparent curtain wall of orange. In fact, there are several shades, from red to yellow, all applied by a film overlay. This fills the peripheral interior with warm light by day, and at night the building glows with a gentle brilliance in the townscape. The colours reference amber, the translucent gemstone formed from Eocene-period resins, most of which come from the Baltic. The cone has a double skin, the inner one 70cm within the outer, the air gap moderating the outside temperature by up to 15°C. As for the cone, it is elliptical in plan and skewed, actually rising vertically where the roof is highest.

The whole building has a slightly dizzy appearance, suggesting spin. This is not the first cone Giencke has designed — in 2006 the practice proposed one for the **Mariazeller Akademie** in Austria. But although the Great Amber Hall's form

is an elemental curved shape, there are few curves in the structure, which internally is a composition dominated by angles both sharp and shallow.

On one side of the Great Amber Hall, where the ellipse narrows, various elements are stacked, starting with some **Music School** rooms below ground. Above these are the **Chamber Music Hall**, then rooms for the **Liepāja Symphony Orchestra**, rehearsal space and a third performance space, the **Experimental Stage**, on top. But above the Music School and occupying the heart of the cone from

the second floor to the roof, is the main space, the **Great Concert Hall**.

This is effectively a nine-sided box floating within the cone, with balconies and two tiers of terrace seating above the stalls, all together almost surrounding an amphitheatre-like stage. **Müller BBM** of Munich engineered the acoustics, which achieve a two-second reverberation time at low frequencies for a warm orchestral sound, but sound-absorbing curtains behind acoustically transparent walls keep high notes crisp. This makes the hall suitable for conferences.

A key part of the Great Amber Hall is called **Civita Nova** — public spaces looking out through the facade from the ground and sixth floors. Here events can be programmed less formally. Founding partner Volker Giencke explains its importance: 'Liepāja was under Soviet occupation until 1991, a so-called **Closed City**, the opposite of a free town managed by democratic principles. Civita Nova can be used by the population of Liepāja at any time.'

The city harbours ambitions to be the Baltic's musical capital, and Giencke proposes next a wide, dramatic, 100m-long ramp extending from the Hall to a new plaza, a floating urban platform, and an arts centre beside it. A future cultural quarter will emerge. The Great Amber Hall has already surfaced, and unlike past submarines, it is definitely not hiding.



1 - The colours of the new building reference amber  
2 - The Great Amber Hall glows at night  
3 - The Civita Nova public spaces look out through the facade