

House of Music London
A Completion of the Barbican Estate

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Interiors Buildings Cities

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The ongoing debate about the London concert halls came to light again, after Simon Rattle returned to the United Kingdom to become the new chief conductor of the London Symphony orchestra. London has multiple classical music venues, but none of them can compete with world class concert halls such as the Wiener Musikverein and Boston Symphony Hall. The Royal Festival Hall and the Royal Albert Hall lack in their acoustical performances and the concert hall of the Barbican Centre is not big enough for a full symphonic orchestra. The quest for a new concert hall runs together with the return of the world famous conductor.

A big cultural metropolis and capital city such as London, should be able to have a well performing concert hall. The MSc3/4 graduation studio *House of Music* expands on the notion of designing a world class concert hall and is shadowing the ongoing project of the *Centre for Music*. This project asks for a music venue that embeds a symphonic hall for the London Symphony Orchestra (LSO) of Simon Rattle and a chamber music hall combined with an education centre as an extension of the Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

The site for the House of Music is the well known Barbican Estate by the British city architects Chamberlin, Powell and Bon. Known as an iconic masterpiece of British Brutalist architecture in the heart of the City of London and listed as a grade II building complex. In architectural history lectures, professors taught me about the Barbican's embedded qualities as a fortification. While visiting, I experienced it as a thick, enclosed ensemble with its own rules on the lap of a medieval street structure shadowed by the ceramic of tall, modern office buildings. With the relocation of the current Museum of London to the Smithfield market, the Southwest corner of the Barbican Estate becomes vacant. So the site of the project is the site of the former museum of London. A last party in the committee for the new Centre for Music project is the Barbican management. The three parties (LSO, GSMD and Barbican) together explain their desire in the media as following:

*"Our aim is to recruit the strongest possible team of outstanding architects and experts from across the globe to seize this **once-in-a-generation opportunity** to create a **landmark new building** that inspires current and future generations through **the power and excitement of live music**."*

– Nicholas Kenyon (2017)

*"**Visually striking, acoustically perfect and open to all**, a new Centre for Music, facing St Paul's Cathedral, Millennium Bridge and Tate Modern, would be an important investment in the strength of the Square Mile and our neighbouring communities."*

– Andrew Parmley (2017)

*"This is an important step towards the transformation of this vibrant area around the Barbican Centre and Guildhall School of Music & Drama into **a world-class cultural hub**. Culture, open and available to everyone, attracts people to work in, live in and visit the Square Mile."*

– Catherine McGuinness (2017)

Their desire to design a landmark building is something I question. The idea to use a public building as a branding strategy is not needed for a cultural city such as London. Elsewhere in Europe you see iconic landmark buildings, such as the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg but also the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao and even the Markthal in Rotterdam, that have the intention to make cities more popular and boost tourism. Even London has quite a lot of landmark buildings that are well known by people. However, I think the House of Music should be there for the city and the inhabitants of London and Londoners and that the true landmark is already there. The Barbican is, as I described before, an example of iconic British Brutalism and the new concert hall building should, in my opinion, finish the broken, open lower corner. Next to this, the GSM and the Barbican Centre can cooperate with the House of Music so the idea of a completed, idealized project (the Barbican) including culture will be even more realised. The building should be open to all and provide a platform for activities and not only function as a concert hall. It should work as the Barbican Arts Centre and as I said before. Moreover, I think that this building should extend on the integration of the existing Barbican Highwalk. The Barbican Highwalk is a raised pedestrian route and result of idealised modernistic town planning present in the complex. It reinforces the physical multilayered character of the site. The maximum difference between the lower level of the garden (-6.0m), the street level (0.0m) and the Highwalk (+5.0m) is 11.0 meters. The House of Music building should be able to let people flow through these different scale, both within and outside the new building.

Also the Barbican Estate has its own community of residents. The Barbican Estate houses about 4000 people and includes next to housing also a big cultural centre; the Barbican Arts Centre. The Barbican Arts Centre shelter art, theatre, music, dance and film, but also education, a library and room for conferences etc. Where it was an enclosed society of sophisticated designers and artists before, is the Barbican nowadays more opened up to the public and used by the inhabitants of the city of London (and greater London) to meet, have dinner or even sit in a public garden in the sun. The new House of Music, can increase the opening up, by adding an all day public room on the direct opposite side of the Barbican Estate. Together the House of Music and the Silkstreet entrance can create a North-South connection on Garden level by the addition of two bridges.

So, as a third important element in the Barbican Centre, I want to continue the public gardens. The Barbican has multiple gardens, both on garden and Highwalk level. The Gardens are sometimes for the residents only, but sometimes open to all. For example the Beech Garden and the Lake terrace.

As a last element, the material character of the Barbican. As mentioned before, the Barbican is an example of British brutalism, so the main material is concrete. However, the rough concrete surfaces of the Barbican residential buildings are bush-hammered to add a more finesse grain to the material. The architects actually never called their architecture 'brutalistic' as there is so much richness in how it is treated. Next to the concrete, the residential parts are standing on dark-purple/brownish clinker bricks. On the other hand, the public faces of the Barbican are clad with white tiles and thus become readable as public functions. The boxes on the Barbican Arts Centre at Lake Terrace are white tiled abstract boxes so is the facade of the current Museum of London clad with white tiles.

The urban shape of the building consists of two big ziggurat shaped boxes standing on a grey-brownish rough brick plinth. The plinth is following the level of the multi-layered Barbican estate and jumps between the levels of the Highwalk, street and garden. The ziggurats are clad with white terracotta glazed blocks and the brick plinth creates the surface between public and raised ground of the concert hall. The terracotta blocks are slanted vertically. They highlight the verticality with a lit up face and a shadowed face. The buildings is almost closed and only shows a composition of three windows on every oblique. It is a solid poche that extends on the poche of the Barbican itself.

The ziggurats are directly following the grid of the Barbican that has been derived from the grid of the Roman wall. In its elevation the ziggurats have their setbacks in relation to the elevation of the Barbican housing surrounding it.

The House of Music project I worked on consists of three halls. The two big ziggurat shaped boxes that shelter the concert and chamber music hall and one hall that is enclosed behind the two volumes to house a multi-purpose room. A big room that is space given back to the public, and even more important, to the Barbican Estate. A room that is connected with a public bar and restaurant that can function apart from the big room. Also the education and offices and back of house is connected to the canteen in the heart of the building and is on its own connected to the "Barbican Room". The Barbican room is connected with a single opening to both the concert hall and chamber hall building where a ticket can be checked. The big multi-purpose hall works as a buffer zone to collect people, allow them to store their coats in the cloakroom and guide them in the right way to the concert. In contrary to the concert hall, this big multi-functional hall is open during day and is an extension of the public rooms of the Barbican Arts Centre. It is a room of 10 metres high with a ground surface of 700m², where sport events, public lectures, art exhibitions, other music performances, theatre, etc. can happen. It works together with the Barbican Arts Centre and opens up not only the House of Music, but also the Barbican to the city of London.

The symphonic hall of the House of Music is like the exterior of the ziggurat(s) stepping back but in the opposite direction. This creates the feeling that the audience sit in a negative ziggurat poche of the big hall. To increase this idea of sitting in a negative, the material of the exterior is used in the interior of the hall too. The hall is built out of three layers. A wooden base layer, that will be read as a one piece of crafted furniture, a middle part clad with the terracotta panels as the exterior, to provide the desired sound reflection so acoustical reasons, and a full black ceiling that should be almost invisible so the audience will experience the ceiling as the dark sky in the night. This sky roof enlarges the idea of sitting in a negative space and creates the impression that you might be in another Barbican Garden.