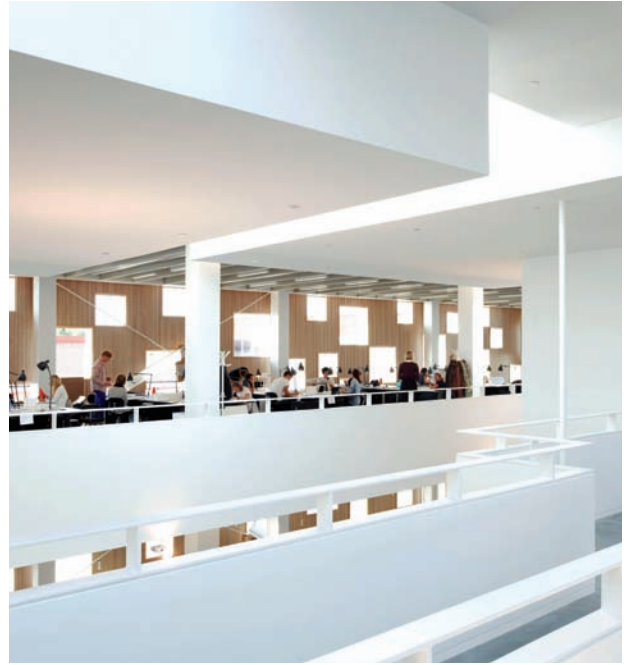




School of
Architecture,
Umeå, Sweden,
Henning Larsen
Architects with
White Arkitekter

2



RUBRIC CUBES

Despite its evident scenographic qualities, a new architecture school in Sweden's high north lacks a fully expressive connection with its commendably holistic approach to pedagogy

While there is an almost daily news story of the Arctic Circle's oil and mineral extraction gathering pace, mixed with equally dramatic polar climate change melt controversies, striking stories about developments in Europe's high north generally don't make it into the broader media limelight.

Sweden's largest northern city, Umeå, is a case in point. In 2014 Umeå will be one of Europe's Capitals of Culture (along with Riga), themed around openness and participation. A suite of new buildings, including a showcase culture house designed by Norway's Snøhetta, plus a hotel and shopping malls, are on site. With a policy of developing the Northern regional centres, significant central Government investment has also poured into the regions of Sweden's eastern Bothnian seaboard rail infrastructure, aimed at connecting the main coastal towns of Sundsvall, Skellefteå, Örnsköldsvik and Umeå itself, in a single linear cluster. With regional routes already running, rail journey times to Stockholm will be dramatically cut from an 11-hour trundle to a four-hour high-north TGV when the line finally opens in December.

Another ambitious piece of infrastructure investment – more immediately relevant to the architectural world – is Umeå's new Arts Campus with a budget of €37 million. Designed by one of Denmark's best regarded practices, Henning Larsen Architects, in collaboration with the local, Umeå, office of Sweden's largest practice, White Arkitekter, the Arts Campus is notable for a variety of reasons, not least it includes Sweden's fourth architecture school, the first new one for 44 years. It is also an attempt at joined up arts education thinking, as alongside the architecture school, the city's art museum has decamped to a brand new museum, and a new art school building has replaced the old one. All three institutions stand in a group, along with a fourth office building to the compact linear campus, which sits alongside the river Ume.

This signals a significant if specific higher educational investment by Sweden in a sector widely considered architecturally in the doldrums compared with its three

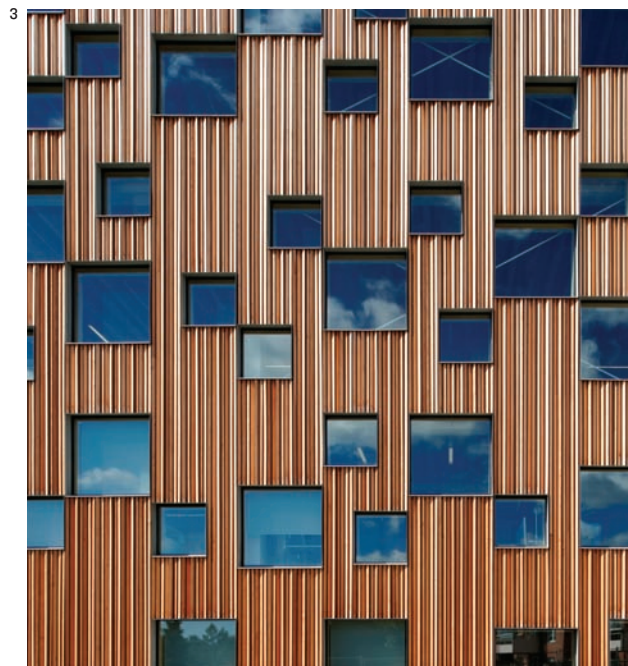
Nordic neighbours. There are further reasons, most connected to regional development though there are also strategic concerns, which cut across development agendas. Umeå is committed to developing an arts-focused curriculum, which is a first nationally, since Sweden's three other architecture schools (KTH Stockholm, Chalmers Gothenburg and Lund in southern Sweden) are all technical university departments. One interpretation of the appointment of a Danish Dean, Peter Kjær (formerly head of the architecture school in Aarhus), plus Henning Larsen's involvement, is their links to Danish architectural education's emphasis on the value of design.

Though the school has been open for three years, it was only in autumn 2010 that staff and students moved into the new building. Undergraduate numbers already exceed the planned 250. The arts focus can be found across a curriculum that highlights architecture's physical dimension, albeit balanced by theory and technology. Katrin Sten, the deputy dean, points to an emphasis on students using their hands, expressed in model making, live projects and sculptural exercises. 'There is an absence in the Swedish architectural world of a holistic approach. We are encouraging drawing, along with theoretical and computer studies, as ways of researching into form and space.' The intention is for architectural students to work with art students, with potential for co-learning. Underlining the physical is only part of the aim to provide a holistic synthesis, integrating theory, history, technology, planning, into the courses. All this suggests an approach of experiential learning; a pedagogy aiming to encompass the body and the senses, hardly alien to the Nordic tradition. There are also two masters programmes, with high-profile academic recruits including Austrians Walter Unterrainer and Jana Revedin (although Revedin has already left) and Hanif Kara of AKT.

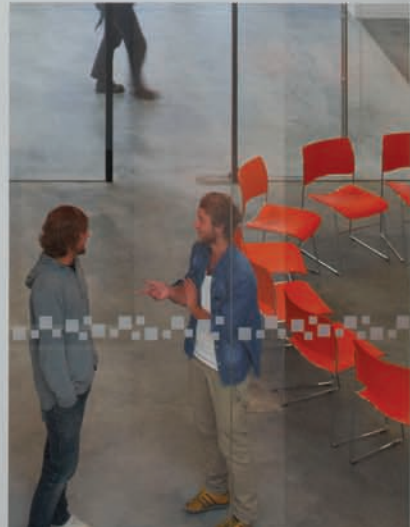
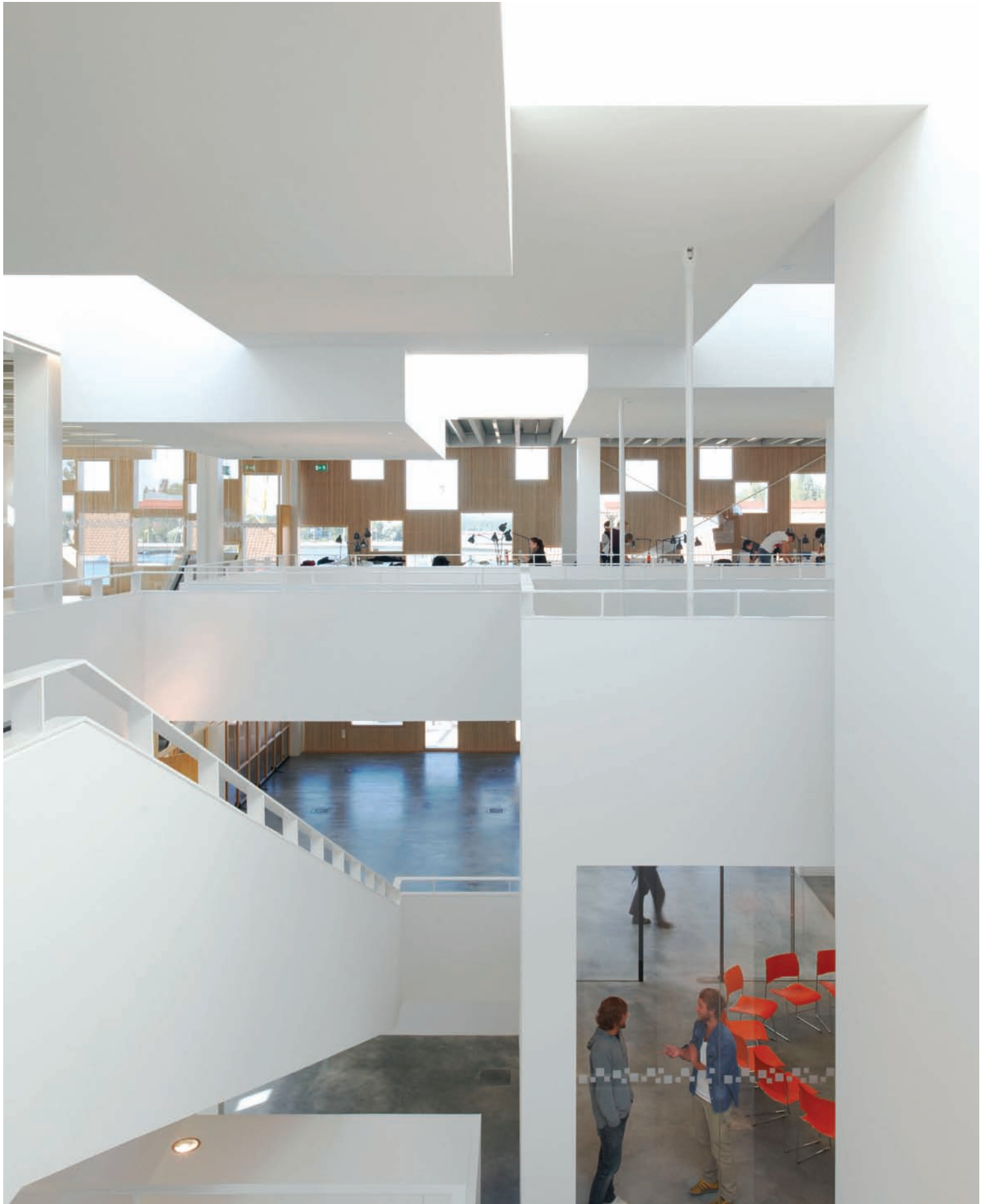
This arts-based agenda also makes sense given the city's creative history. Umeå's development really began in the mid 1960s when it was chosen as the home for the country's first northern university, precipitating a near doubling of population from 60,000 in the mid-1960s to 114,000 by 2011. The university experienced a radical late-'60s period, and a local DIY grassroots arts, music

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'The walk-through quality anticipates joint art and architectural student projects, as does the art museum's commitment to working collaboratively with the schools'



1. (Previous page, left) students informally congregating on the grand staircase linking seminar and teaching spaces on the ground floor with upper level studios
2. (Previous page, right) open plan studios overlook the central lightwell
3. Detail of the striated timber facade, a kind of 'vertical parquet' made from imported Siberian larch
4. The airy openness of the building is intended to encourage a sense of encounter and engagement



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and general creative scene gradually self-seeded, and has remained lively on the ground, if not commercially, for over 30 years. Out of this would come the – initially private – art school in 1979, before turning public in the early '80s, followed in 1989 by the Institute of Design, which focuses on industrial design. The latter features in the top four in global league tables for design schools.

Although there had been previous efforts to bring an architecture school to the north, the university decided in the early 2000s to commit to a school, within an overarching arts and design strategy, helpfully feeding into the city's medium term planning of exploiting the arts community, and highlighting Umeå as a 'creative city'. The first real test of this strategy will come with the City of Culture in 2014. The university, together with one of the major regional developers, the Baltic Group, arrived at the riverfront site between Umeå old town proper to the west, and the more recent '60s university area to the east. Overlooking the Ume, the dedicated Arts Campus is intended to use its magnetic cultural currency as a bridge, drawing together Umeå's two separate parts. This has introduced questions regarding who the Arts Campus is really for, with Johanna Gullberg noting in the Swedish *Arkitektur* magazine, that the isolated position of the Campus, while scenic, is neither obvious nor immediately accessible for most of the city's inhabitants.

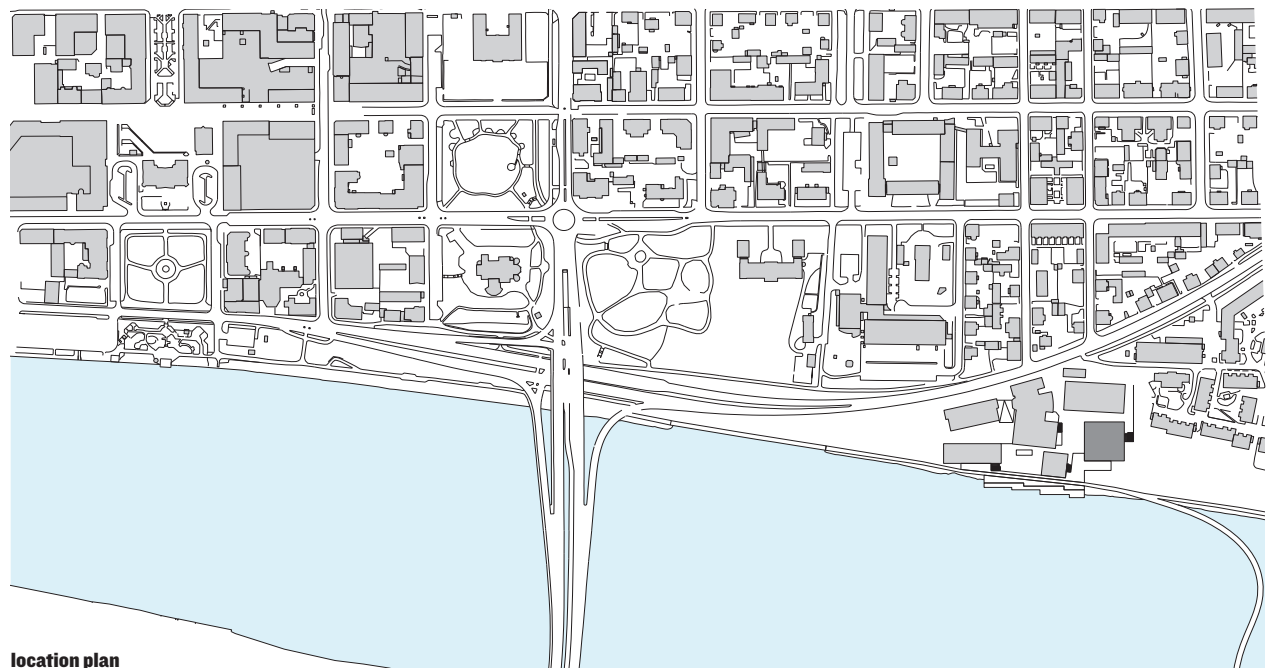
There was an opportunity to explore new educational models, both for the architecture school, and in how the three institutions were to be knitted together into the single Arts Campus. The diverse influences, from the Danish dean and architects, and the highly regarded design school, to the joined-up co-learning and Umeå's self-generated arts scene, all signalled a new direction in Swedish architectural education. Although Henning Larsen are experienced educational architects, given that a dedicated architecture school building is such a typological rarity, the architecture school within the Arts Campus was a new challenge. Well enough known in Sweden, previous projects include Malmö library in the '90s, and Uppsala cultural centre in 2007. This is their first project so far north in mainland Scandinavia, although interestingly, gestation, design and completion have run almost parallel

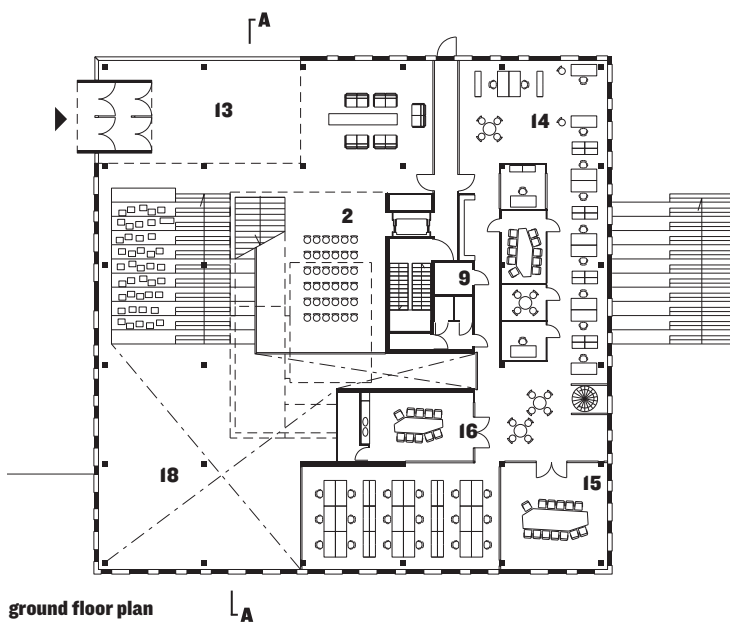


to the office's Harpa Reykjavik concert hall collaboration with Olafur Eliasson. Compared with Harpa, however, a much simpler design strategy was pursued from the outset.

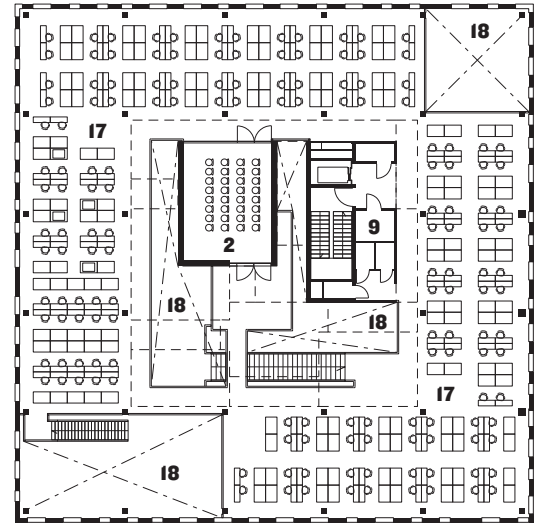
The compact, broad but linear riverside site helps turn the four volumes into a dramatic ensemble of contrasting cubic forms. Both the drama and the overall coherence is reinforced by the use of Siberian larch through all the buildings, each with different, though related patterning, a kind of vertical parquet. All three main buildings are also linked by a common lower ground level, so that both schools' students can use the art museum's restaurant and café, bookshop and shared library. The walk-through quality anticipates joint art and architectural student projects, as does the art museum's commitment to working collaboratively with the schools. At the city-side entrance, visitors pass a huddle of industrial buildings, including the design school's existing older studios, before arriving in an atrium courtyard square: the campus's organisational centrepiece. The architecture school sits to the left, while river and museum – its six-storey vertical volume the atrium's dominating presence – are directly ahead. The lower floor is only revealed if you descend steps to the riverside on the atrium's far side. There's a Mondrianesque quality to the museum facade, comprising longer timber strips, broken up by large rectangular windows, which afford museum visitors panoramic views of the river, forest and city. For the €13.2 million architecture school, the parquet panelling is broken by the

5. The building's timber carapace is hectically pitted with glazed openings

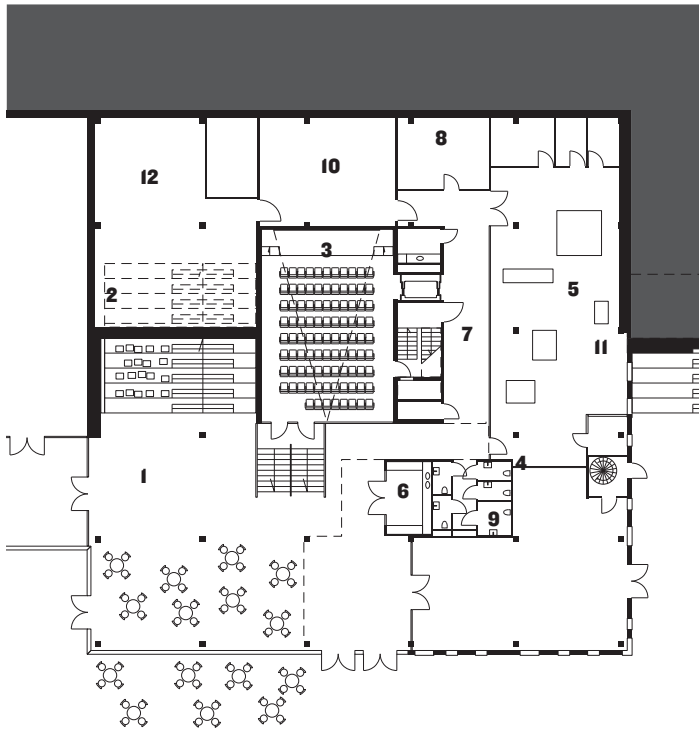




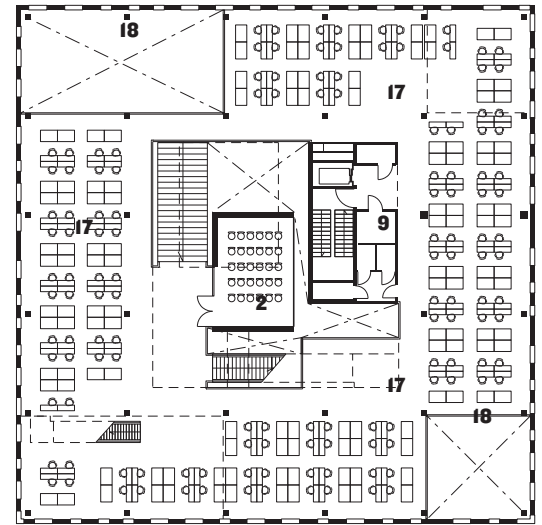
ground floor plan



second floor plan

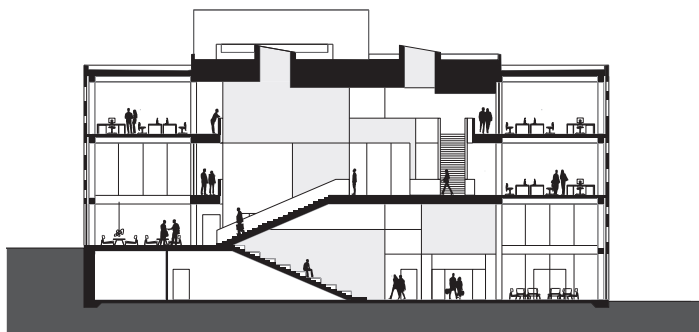


lower ground floor plan

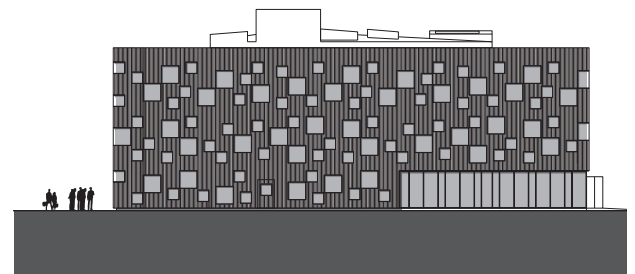


first floor plan

- | | |
|----------------------|-------------------|
| 1 lower foyer | 10 storage |
| 2 group room | 11 office |
| 3 lecture hall | 12 plant |
| 4 workshop | 13 upper foyer |
| 5 machinery | 14 administration |
| 6 pantry | 15 meeting room |
| 7 gallery | 16 staff room |
| 8 wind and light lab | 17 studio |
| 9 WCs | 18 void |



section AA



north elevation







‘The designers were thinking the entire student corpus would be working at computers, hot-desking designs across the internet. But there seems little to suggest the architect either knew of or acknowledged the school’s educational agenda’

odd rhythmic interplay of two-size square windows, while also masking the simplicity of the cube’s volume. The art school is a longer, lower, linear volume set behind the museum and alongside the river, the orthodox windowscape of its four floors creating a less head-turning, timber inflected Miesian building. It was primarily White Arkitekter’s project, with Henning Larsen less involved. The final office building, with long vertical windows for contrast, completes the quartet’s composition.

If the external composition sets the scene and context, it is internally that the educational agenda is expressed. It’s here also, that a slew of difficulties make themselves apparent. A four-storey 5,000 metre building the school is, as Henning Larsen Architects are keen to point out, a single open space. Peer Jeppesen, the Scandinavian projects’ design director, emphasises its openness and adaptability, with student study areas ranged around the outer edges, ‘little sculptural rooms’ running down the building central block, and a series of auditoria, lecture and group seminar spaces. Jeppesen talks of how the open space means that students are always able to see what their colleagues are doing, that the different parts of the building are responsive and dynamically flexible to change. He refers to teaching at Copenhagen’s Royal

Academy School of Architecture, and how difficult it was to adapt set-in-stone rooms. The constant of openness, which extends to the daylighting and window design, allows students to look out of, though also down from the multiple square windows onto the flowing river. The primary trope of openness is communication; the ease, accessibility and fluidity of moving around the building. All this is in line with contemporary Danish school design, and Jeppesen's emphasis on flow, simplicity and openness is reflected in the interior's stylish, minimal design, a textbook leaf out of this new educational orthodoxy. At the same time, however, the design blurs into a minimalist office landscape, a reminder of Peter MacKeith's observation that their masterly attention to detail is a significant part of 'what saves Danish designs from the co-option by the corporate ethos'. Looking down the rows of straight lined desks, it is easy to get the impression that, while uplifting, the designers were thinking the entire student corpus would be working at computers, hot-desking designs across the internet. This sits uncomfortably with a curriculum that, rhetorically at least, has committed to an architecture of the body. There seems little to suggest the architect either knew of or acknowledged the school's educational agenda.

A second leg to this mismatch is the sustainability agenda, embodied in the use of wood in the facade. As a design exercise the parquet timber strips are beguiling, but as sustainability, which is surely in the undertow of their semiotic messaging, they are irritating. Jeppesen says the timber facade was intended to express something of northern Sweden as a region of vast forests. But Siberian larch from the East Asian taiga shipped to a building site in the west Atlantic is symptomatic of what is wrong with mainstream sustainability, even if Jeppesen states the wood could have come from 'anywhere'. Initial designs included research into using timber structurally, but the eventual mix of steel structure and concrete floors, which integrated ventilation into the internal skin of the building, as well as enabling the roof skylight windows to contribute to daylighting, reduced energy use by half, bringing down the overall budget. This is no small matter. Given its latitude Umeå spends over half the year in many

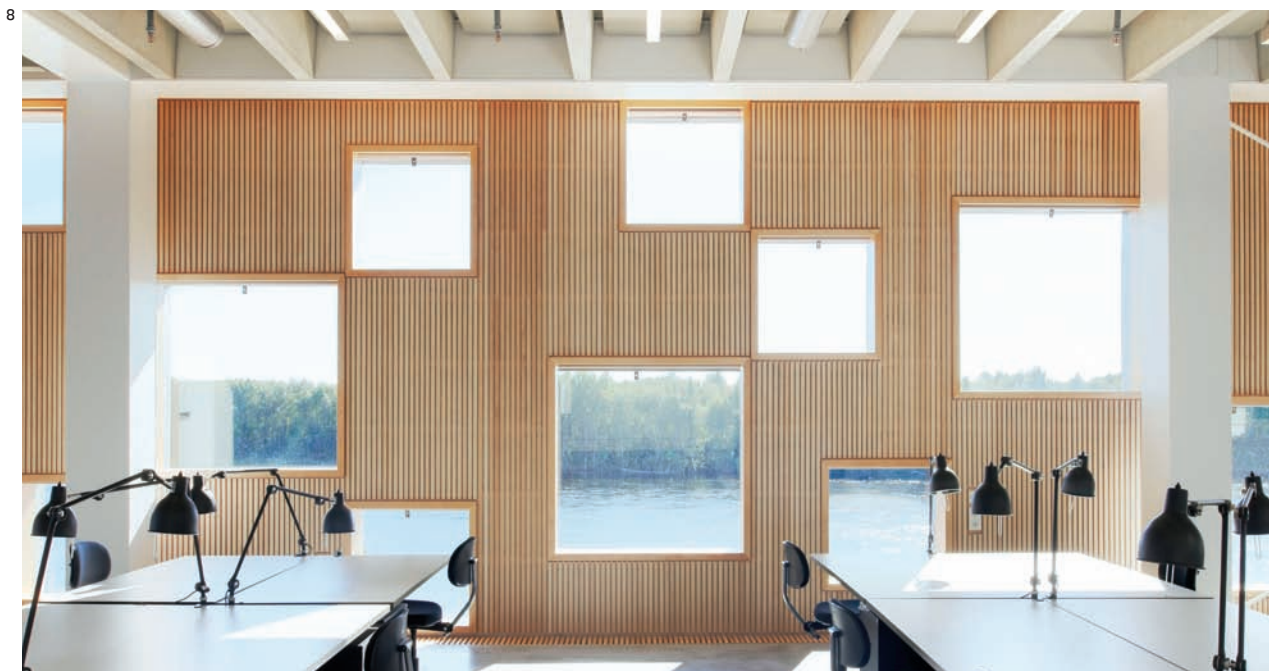
hours of darkness. That the original design also envisaged a full glass curtain wall on the river face suggests the context hadn't been completely thought through. These are surely instances of disconnect. The mismatch between the school's pedagogical vision, and the office environment which Henning Larsen and White have delivered, presents contested versions of educational thinking. Informally I heard that project practices, university management and developer paid only limited attention to the issues concerning the architecture school's staff. The speed the build was happening at, and the rate of decision-making undermined consultation. The time lag between the original design period and the build, which was when the school's pedagogical structures were taking shape, was also a big problem. Still, for a city which is staging their capital of culture around themes of openness and curiosity, the irony is as dispiriting as it is mirthful; participation shaping the new architecture school seems to have been next to non-existent.

Two paradigms for learning are to be found at the architecture school. One is built, the other intangible and non-physical. The first derives from the template of a recent highly successful Nordic export; Danish educational building design, open and flexible, democratic and also replicable across different contexts. Yet also unprepared and less adaptable than one might have thought when faced with the second example, originating out of emerging academic thinking. Whatever claims any holistic pedagogy of the body has on architectural education and its future, the absence of mechanisms to consider, let alone accommodate it, surely reflects weaknesses in the mainstream model. While such sidelining is accepted and normal across so much of architecture, the pity is that it happened at a new architectural school.

I left Umeå puzzled by how thoroughly the idealism of the educational rhetoric had been passed up on by those realising these buildings. Despite some lovely scenographic qualities, and interesting joined-up thinking embodied in the Arts Campus, this absence left me unsettled as to how dialogue between commercial big architecture and those preparing the next generations of architects can be bridged. If it doesn't happen here, then where?

School of Architecture, Umeå, Sweden, Henning Larsen Architects with White Arkitekter

Architect
Henning Larsen Architects with White Arkitekter
Floor and table lamps
Örsjö Belysning
Photographs
Ake E:son Lindman



6. (Previous pages) typical studio space with pods of work desks animated by student activity. The language of the striated facade is carried through into the interior, which is lined with thin strips of timber
7. Bridging the gap? Questions remain about the school's ability to structure the dialogue between commercial architecture and the next generation of architects
8. Light and views percolate through the irregular geometry of the window openings