



Welcome to the Cultural Centre

Universal Design for Active and Social Lives





KOMMUNESEKTORENS ORGANISASJON

The Norwegian Association of Local and
Regional Authorities

COVER PHOTO: In the dance hall at Vestby Cultural Quarter, Trinh Duong is enjoying a baby dance session with her seven-month-old son Benjamin. Read more on page 10.
(Photo: Fredrik Naumann/Felix Features)

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Graphic design: Bly

Printing: Byråservice

Publication date: 2025

ISBN: 978-82-93866-64-0

This booklet was published by KS

The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS) is the organisation for all local governments in Norway. KS is Norway's largest public employer organisation. All of the country's 357 municipalities and 15 county councils are members, as well as about 500 municipal, intermunicipal and county council undertakings.

This booklet was inspired by the members of KS Municipal Network for Universal Design, established in 2013 and funded by the Ministry of Culture. The goal is to contribute to an inclusive society by sharing best practices and removing barriers.

“The magic of culture is the synergies it creates.”

Elin Høyholm Lappegård
Director, Vestby Cultural Quarter

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Read more about the cultural quarter for all ages in Vestby on page 10.

Cultural centres for everyone

In many small and large municipalities, the cultural centre is the very heart of the local community – a place that facilitates experiences, but perhaps even more importantly, fosters participation and togetherness. This is why it is so crucial that these centres are universally designed.

In this booklet, we explore how three cultural centres across Norway have taken steps to become more accessible.

All projects face challenges. The examples in this booklet are not intended to serve as perfect examples, but rather as inspiration and learning opportunities. We have intentionally challenged everyone we interviewed to reflect on what they could have done differently.

All under one roof

There are few closed doors at the Kimen Cultural Centre, whose goal is to accommodate everyone. This has resulted in a cultural centre that has won awards for its accessibility, a place where people feel welcome.



Home to a café, cinema, concert hall, non-denominational ceremony room, youth centre, library, church and school of music and performing arts

Opened in 2015

15,700 m²

Price tag: NOK 717 million



AWE-INSPIRING: Kimen is also home to Stjørødal Church, with a staggering ceiling height of 16 metres. Collective ownership has been established between the building owner and the Stjørødal Church Council, and the staff members have their offices in the cultural centre.

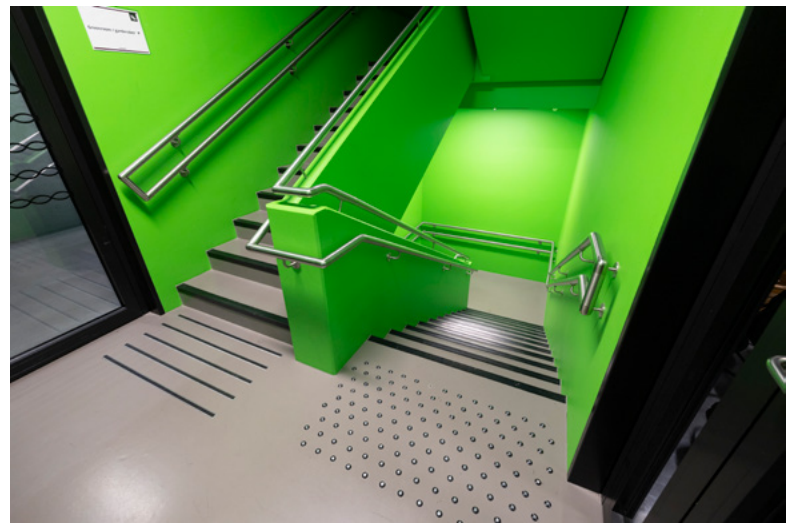
It is impossible to miss the Kimen Cultural Centre in the Stjørødal city centre. It towers – quite literally – over the end of Kimen Park. The black-and-white sign over the entrance is highly visible, making it easy to spot for those with a visual impairment. The building’s silhouette is crown-shaped, giving the towering black building a majestic appearance. Equally as awe-inspiring is the list of functions and activities found at the cultural centre and the measures taken to make the entire building accessible.

“Openness was the driving principle. It has to be clear to everyone that they are welcome here. It should be a pleasant place for people to spend time,” says the director of the cultural centre, Astrid Cecilie Olaussen.

**“It should be a pleasant place
for people to spend time.”**

Astrid Cecilie Olaussen





GREEN NAVIGATION: The inside stairways, fire escapes and meeting rooms are all painted bright green. This makes it easy to navigate around the building for everyone, including those with a visual or cognitive impairment.



GOOD SOUND: Behind these doors is the rehearsal room for musicians. This is where the school of music and performing arts in Stjørdal holds classes. The rooms are specially designed for a high-quality sound experience. One of the most important measures implemented throughout the building is the use of acoustic slatted wood wall panels. This is an important facilitation for those with a hearing impairment.

RECOGNITION

Only a year after opening in 2015, Kimen won the Accessibility Award from the Council for the Equality of Persons with Disabilities in North Trøndelag. In 2020, the centre was awarded the Norwegian concert organisers' accessibility certification. Only two small technical rooms in the 50,700 square metre building are not accessible to wheelchair users. There are 16 accessible parking spaces in the underground car park and an accessible toilet with a changing table for adults.

“The bathroom is also accessible to anyone in the Stjørdal city centre who needs this facility,” says the head of development, Arne Fridthjof Venæs.



FLEXIBLE: The library has both an adult section and juvenile section, two study rooms with glass doors and mobile bookcases.





TACTILE AND LEGIBLE: Kimen has information signs with good contrast and many of them also have braille for those with a visual impairment.

→ **LONG OPENING HOURS**

The director of the cultural centre, Astrid Cecilie Olausen, calls the easily accessible reception desk in the library the heart of the cultural centre. The library organises free events and has an excellent working relationship with the volunteer sector. The cultural centre is open seven days a week from 9 in the morning until 9:30 in the evening. Having long opening hours is important, but also poses a number of challenges.

“We have security guards to ensure safety and security, and to prevent undesirable events, as well as to assist visitors. When users are not

identified as requiring assistance or met with interest and friendliness, mistakes can more easily be made,” says the director, and adds,

“As you can see, we have lots of different activities and a wide range of visitors. Oddly enough, we have achieved a peaceful co-existence.” ●

YOUTH CENTRE: ‘Carbon’ is the recreational centre at the Kimen Cultural Centre, where there are always at least two adults present. Kimen offers young people diverse, inclusive and drug-free recreational activities. The youth centre is open to all those who have started middle school up to the age of 18 years. Activities for upper primary school pupils are also organised every Wednesday.



Director of the Cultural Centre Astrid Cecilie Olaussen and Head of Development and Arne Fridthjof Venæs, Kimen Cultural Centre

Solutions:

- Information signs with good contrast
- Many of the signs also have braille for those with a visual impairment
- Accessible toilet with changing table for adults
- Acoustic slatted wood wall panels
- The library has an adult section and juvenile section, two study rooms with glass doors and mobile bookcases
- 16 accessible parking spots in the underground car park, with a lift up to the cultural centre
- The inside stairways and fire escapes are painted bright green to make them clearly visible and easy to identify for those with a visual impairment – this way, everyone can easily navigate around the building, including those with a visual or cognitive impairment
- Threshold-free access to all public areas
- 6 wheelchair spots in the concert hall
- Hearing loop in the Storsalen, Vektorsalen, cinema and Stjørdal church
- Orientation lines for blind or visually impaired

- persons on the outside of the building that lead to the information desk inside the centre and further to the main rooms
- Accessible toilet behind the stage of the main auditorium for use by performers and speakers
- Since 2020, all production staff have attended annual accessibility courses

What we could have done differently:

- Orientation lines:

“There should be orientation lines on the second floor leading from the lifts. In the current situation, it can be difficult to navigate towards the rehearsal room, auditorium or library.”
- Wheelchair spaces:

“We could have also approached the wheelchair spaces in the auditorium a bit differently. But a sliding amphitheatre limits the options for wheelchair spaces. We have received feedback from users who do not feel safe because the wheelchair spots are located on the second floor and not on the ground level, making evacuation difficult in the event of a fire.”

Arena for all ages

Senior dance on the first floor, baby dance on the third. The new cultural quarter in Vestby welcomes local residents of all ages and abilities.



Opened in September 2023, 10,000 square metres
Price tag: NOK 500 million



DANCING THROUGH LIFE: In the multipurpose room, 95-year-old Gertrude Johanna Endresen swings to the music at senior dancing with Aud Fray. Inger Marie Johansen and Gerd Engø take to the dance floor behind them.

“I have hearing difficulties and am a bit weak in the legs, but I love to dance!”

Ninety-five-year-old Gertrude Johanna Endresen, who likes to be called Gerti, explains with a smile why she can be found on the dance floor in the multipurpose room in Vestby’s new meeting place. It’s Friday in the middle of a bright late morning and the Follo Senior Dance has filled the room with pensioners. There are mostly women, but also a few brave men. Gerti is the oldest participant today, but one of the most enthusiastic ones.

“It’s a great way to meet people and be social,” she says and dances a few more steps.

POPULAR GATHERING SPACE

The director of the Vestby Cultural Quarter, Elin Høyholm Lappegard, is pleased with yet another day with lots of visitors of all ages.

“The cultural centre is truly an arena for all ages,” she says.

“A place for learning, co-creation, mastery and experiences, the centre is designed and built as an inclusive gathering space in the municipality, a meeting place for everyone.

“This includes those with a disability and special needs,” she emphasises.





“The cultural centre is truly
an arena for all ages.”

Elin Høyholm Lappegard

When the new cultural centre opened its doors in September 2023, local residents were more than ready. “During the first nine days, we had 15,500 visitors, a number that corresponds to nearly the entire population of Vestby”, says Lappegard.

Since the opening, the building has been packed with people and activities, from the library and auditoriums of various sizes to the café, broad range of courses offered by the school of music and performing arts, and events both big and small from morning to evening. The top floor is reserved for the maternity and child healthcare centre and general practitioner offices.



FUN FOR YOUNG AND OLD: Ingunn Mørk and six-month-old Alfred (left) dance with Simone Maria Eichstetter and eight-month-old Eva.

BRINGSVÆRD'S BOOK WORLD

To truly welcome all users, the building has a universal design down to the very last detail. The stepless entrances on several sides of the building, clear signage, orientation lines and strategically placed lift all make it easier to navigate around the centre.

“We also simply have plenty of space, which is important for ensuring that the centre can be used by everyone,” says Lappegard.

The cultural centre is around 10,000 square metres, with plenty of room to manoeuvre with a walker and wheelchair, and finding a place to park a pram is a piece of cake.



WARM INTERIOR: Textile, woodwork and acoustic panelling on the walls and ceilings help create a pleasant atmosphere and good sound conditions in this large building.

MAIN THOROUGHFARE: The stairway with lighting and dark handrails connects the different floors and functions in the centre. The public lift is centrally located next to the stairs.





→ – “We have lots of large common areas that can be used in different ways. But even though the centre is large, it is not so large that people find it unpleasant. It’s a nice place to spend time,” she believes.

The auditoriums and several of the rooms are named after the literary universe of Tor Åge Bringsværd, a well-known local author. The largest auditorium (Storsalen) is called ‘Tambar’, the multipurpose room ‘Gobi’, the dance hall is called ‘Glassberget’ and the amphitheatre ‘Onkel Ludvik’.

In the meeting rooms, we find such characters as ‘Løveungen’, ‘Frøken kanin’ and ‘Ruffen’.

“We are very proud of Bringsværd and are delighted that he wanted to collaborate with us,” says Lappegard.

MAGICAL CULTURE

The new cultural centre is located in the heart of the Vestby city centre close to the railway station, shopping centre and city hall. Vestby is only 22 minutes by train from Oslo Central Station and is a strong growth municipality. The current population is around 19,000 and 6,000 new homes are scheduled to be built in the municipality.

“Development plans for the area will lead to a much denser city centre that will include both homes and commercial properties, with the cultural quarter as the very heart,” says Daniel Ellingsen from the property division of the Municipality of Vestby.

The price tag for the new cultural quarter in Vestby exceeded NOK 500 million, but the

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SPACIOUS GATHERING PLACE:

Producer Trude Saksen in the ‘Tambar’ auditorium with 512 seats. Wheelchair spaces are in the first row. The flexible amphitheatre can be rolled in entirely if the room is to be used for standing concerts. With this configuration, there are still seats up in the gallery.



CLARITY: Good contrast and clear markings, here leading to the ‘green and others involved in a production can prepare and relax before and after the performance



ALL IN A ROW: Green room with room for plenty of performers.

municipality expects the initiative to have considerable and positive ripple effects in the local community. Elin Høyholm Lappegard already sees more people and more activity in the city centre.

“The magic of culture is the synergies it creates,” she says.

“It has a strong intrinsic value, but is also important for everything from the business community to public health. Our task here is to facilitate a good, meaningful life, a place where people can participate and get together and promote belonging. This lets us help create a sense of community, which is the key to a thriving society.” ●



Elin Høyholm Lappegard,
director of the Vestby
Cultural Quarter

Solutions:

- Threshold-free access on three sides of the centre
- Plenty of room to get around with a wheelchair, walker and pram
- Plenty of room for pram parking
- Accessible parking spaces on all sides of the centre
- Accessible toilets
- Centrally located public lift
- Clear signage with good contrasts
- Hearing loop
- Good acoustics with extensive use of sound-absorbing panelling, textiles and woodwork

What we could have done differently:

“We just moved in and have to use the centre for a while before we can evaluate and make any adjustments. For now, everything seems to work as intended.”

A barrier-free concert hall

Universal design alone does not make the Stormen Concert Hall a place for everyone. There has also been a change in philosophy.



BODØ'S CULTURAL HEART: The celebrated, universally-designed Stormen Library and Stormen Cultural Centre have become the heart and soul of the new and improved Bodø city centre.



OUTSTANDING ACOUSTICS: Director Rasmus Adrian in the very heart of the Stormen Concert Hall. The main performance hall has been called one of the world’s best concert halls thanks to its outstanding acoustics.

“The mental barrier also needs to be broken,” says Rasmus Adrian, the director of the Stormen Concert Hall since 2020.

“From a purely physical perspective, the building itself is accessible, of course. But physical access alone is by no means sufficient. We need to make sure that people actually use the concert hall. This means facilitating usage and creating content that lowers the barrier,” he explains.

DIVERSITY GUARANTEE

The objective is clearly defined in Stormen’s strategy: The concert hall is to guarantee diversity.

“It is a fantastic concept that means that we need to create a wide range of offerings for a



LOTS OF QUESTIONS: Do you have a lift to all floors of the building? Where is the wheelchair seating located in the hall? These are the most common questions asked of ticket coordinator Marianne Hammersten. The answers? Yes, and in rows 14 and 19.



→ diverse audience. We need to keep in mind at all times that it is our job to actually reach as many people as possible,” says Adrian, who believes that this also includes universal design.

“One of the ways this objective is expressed is through how we think about our programme profile,” says Adrian.

A dedicated programme department is one of the measures that has been implemented since he began working here.

“In the past, the concert hall was primarily organised with a focus on renting out the space. Content and profile were therefore the responsibility of external organisers and their markets. Renting out the venue continues to be an important part of our economy and purpose, but the focus has changed,” explains the director.

“What is most important is a genuine desire to invite all people inside.”

Rasmus Adrian



ROOM FOR WHEELCHAIRS: Rows of chairs can easily be removed to make room for wheelchairs.



FREQUENT VISITORS: “I grew up in the 1960s and 1970s and like music that is a bit rough. I can enjoy that here and go to several concerts a year,” says Jarle Arntzen. Sidsel Simonsen has a different taste in music, but is equally as fond of the concert hall. Both are active members of the Bodø branch of the Norwegian Association of the Blind and Partially Sighted.



BRIGHT AND AIRY: Lighting was also a main consideration during the design phase of Stormen. Good light from above and minimal glare also makes the building easy to use for Jarle Arntzen and Sidsel Simonsen, both of whom have a visual impairment.



SMART LIGHTING: The lighting along the stairs makes navigation easier. Both Sidsel Simonsen and Jarle Arntzen would like to see clearly marked stair tread edges – and can expect just that before long.

CHIC AND CHALLENGING

The concert house was originally built primarily for rental purposes. It has a large foyer with a counter, stairs and a lift up to the four performance halls.

“It’s a fantastic building, but was clearly not designed with respect to free events for everyone, so it does not really feel like a cultural centre,” says Adrian.

“That is why we are making changes. There is very easy access directly from the street – which has heated pavements. You enter right into the foyer, which can be utilised much better. There will be a lot more concerts and events here,” says Director Rasmus Adrian.

He believes the key to creating a gathering place for everyone is not to focus on legislation, strategy or rules.

“Obviously, those things are important, but what is most important is a genuine desire to invite all people inside.” ●



UP CLOSE: The writing next to the lift is sufficient for Sidsel Simonsen, but it is important that she can read it from close up.



Director
Rasmus Adrian,
Stormen Concert Hall

Solutions:

- Custom lighting: lighting that creates contrasts for easier navigation
- The right brightness in every area: 200 lux in the corridors, 300 lux in the information boards and brighter light in the reception area than elsewhere
- General lighting principle: smart lighting, with the amount of light emitted adjusted according to the natural daylight
- Shielding to avoid reflection and glare
- Double handrails with lighting
- Signs with good contrast
- Clear contrast between doors and walls
- Orientation line leading to information desk
- Heated pavements outside the entrance

What we could have done differently:

- Clear stair tread edges
- Braille under the handrails with floor information
- Better signage: understanding where the lift is located is not easy, for example
- Level difference between seat rows and other walking areas in the hall

A number of these issues are already being improved



LIBRARY: The Stormen cultural quarter in Bodø also includes a universally designed public library, located next to the concert hall.

A comfortable and welcoming performance

A smart measure has been implemented to attract more people to the Stormen Concert Hall.

The concept? ‘Relaxed Performance’, which emerged in England in the 1990s.

“The goal is to communicate culture to everyone,” explains Charlotte Gjertsen, whose work focuses on sales, audiences, diversity and inclusion at the Norwegian Arctic Philharmonic Orchestra. In Norway, Relaxed Performance is referred to as Relæxt. The initiator is Hålogaland Theatre, which has worked together with UiT The Arctic University of Norway and Volda University College in drafting the concept. The Norwegian Arctic Philharmonic joined the partnership almost immediately and the concept has gradually spread to a wide array of cultural institutions in Northern Norway.

LOWERING THE THRESHOLD

The director of the concert hall, Rasmus Adrian, points out that Stormen is intended for everyone.

“It is virtually impossible to talk about universal design without talking about accessibility. It’s all about inclusion in the broadest sense of the word, and includes such things as respect, understanding and openness,” says the director.

That is exactly why Stormen has partnered up with the Norwegian Arctic Philharmonic for the Relæxt concerts.

“It goes without saying that all concerts are for everyone. But there are many people who for different reasons find it challenging to go to a regular classical concert. So, the threshold to visit Stormen may be too high for them. The solution is Relæxt,” explains Charlotte Gjertsen.

“We do not adapt the artistic content. Everyone should have access to the same type of concert, so the adaptations we make allow more people to enjoy the experience.”

MEANINGFUL ADAPTATIONS

One of the adaptations made is to keep the lights on in the performance hall.

“We only dim the lights slightly. This makes navigation easier for those with visual impairments and, of course, it makes it easier for everyone to go in and out. After all, during a Relæxt performance, audience members can go in and out of the hall as often as they need to,” emphasises Gjertsen.

“Some need to use the bathroom often, while



ART FOR EVERYONE:

“The artistic content is not adapted. The goal is to make adaptations that enable as many people as possible to experience the performances,” explains Charlotte Gjertsen, who works with sales, audiences, diversity and inclusion at the Norwegian Arctic Philharmonic.

others need to withdraw from the stimulus and take a break.”

The sound and length of the performance is adapted by reducing the sound level during the loudest parts and by shortening the concert duration. Relæxt is also a ‘hush-free’ zone, which means that involuntary movements, crying, laughing and shouting are all acceptable, but no one is allowed to ‘hush’ anyone else. Spacious furnishing is also important to ensure enough space for everyone.

INFORMATION IS KEY

Detailed information is another focal area.

“This refers to information on what you can expect at the concert or performance. A trigger list has also been developed in close partnership with various organisations, i.e. a summary of what can be experienced as difficult or uncomfortable,” explains Charlotte Gjertsen.

The information also covers purely practical matters, such as parking, access, cloakroom and everything that makes a visit to Stormen more predictable – and therefore safer. As part of this, a visual guide has been prepared that

describes a visit to the concert hall from A to Z. All adaptations are developed in close collaboration with users.

“After all, we can’t just infer what, for example, is light or dark enough, high or low enough. It is the users themselves who need to let us know what is needed to ensure a good cultural experience,” adds Gjertsen.

There are also two trained attendants in the hall during concerts to assist audience members as needed.

“The attendants are non-judgmental, helpful, trained to read people’s signals and have plenty of time for each individual.”

POPULAR ALTERNATIVE

Who exactly attends the Relæxt concerts – and why – has not been analysed.

“Do many people attend these performances because the programme is interesting or because of the adaptations make them feel more at home? We don’t really know, but what we do know is that they are very popular,” says Charlotte Gjertsen of the Norwegian Arctic Philharmonic. ●

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