

Culture writ large

Stavanger

Neil Jones finds the artistic city behind those strange identical sculptures

They may not have quite the dramatic impact of his *Angel of the North* but Antony Gormley's series of 23 identical sculptures called *Broken Column* in Stavanger certainly generated a huge amount of interest — and debate — when they were installed between 1999 and 2003. They continue to be a major attraction for locals and visitors alike.

The project was commissioned by the city's Rogaland Museum of Fine Arts and the first 1.95m tall cast-iron figure — a replica of Gormley's own body — stands in its own space at the museum. Each succeeding sculpture lies exactly 1.95m below the preceding one at different important locations in the city: in front of the cathedral, the courthouse, a petrol station, a school, a football pitch, even outside a private house. All the locations represent important aspects of life in the city.

The final sculpture in this broken column sits at the fish market looking outwards across the harbour towards the sea. It is this sculpture that dictates the orientation of the others — they all face exactly eight degrees west of true north.

Sculpture is far from being the only aspect of culture in Stavanger. Indeed culture of all descriptions is writ large in the fabric of the city, from the performing arts to museums by way of painting and photography.

Last year Stavanger was a European Capital of Culture with a theme of "Open Port" and it was perhaps appropriate that work started during that year on a new concert hall, scheduled for completion in 2012.

The new hall will have two auditoria. One will be for orchestral concerts and the other a multipurpose space that can be adapted for all types of musical performances. By opening one wall towards an outdoor amphitheatre an audience of up to 10,000 people can enjoy the performances. For the first time in the city, it will be possible to put on fully staged operas.

The concert hall will become home to the excellent Stavanger Symphony Orchestra, which under its chief conductor, the American Steven Sloane, performs an eclectic programme of works.

For the European Year of Culture the orchestra put on a superb concert performance of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, while its ability to cover a wider repertoire was illustrated by a brilliant music theatre production, *Byterminalen* (City Terminal). With captivating music by Håkon Berge and lyrics by Gunnar Roalkvåg, it related the stories and interaction of people in Stavanger's main bus and train terminal. It was appropriate, if slightly bizarre, that the performance took place there, late into the evening after the buses had finished running.

The orchestra's autumn programme includes a variety of material from a Scarlatti opera through Mozart and Haydn to Wagner.

Stavanger is also home to Tove



Silent witness: one of 23 identical cast-iron sculptures by Antony Gormley that are scattered around the city

Sundt-Hansen, one of Norway's best-known painters, who has exhibited at both the Frida Hansens Hus and the Galleri Amare in the city, as well as in many other parts of Norway. Sundt-Hansen's works, painted mainly in acrylic, are startlingly vibrant, often reflecting the landscapes of the city and the surrounding countryside.

Perhaps of more general interest are two other museums in the city: the Norwegian Canning Museum and the Norwegian Petroleum Museum. Both provide a fascinating insight into aspects of Stavanger's economic history and are well worth a visit, especially given that they are

within easy walking distance of the city centre and harbour.

It seems appropriate that the Canning Museum is situated in the old part of the city while the Petroleum Museum, representing the new economy, is down by the harbour in a modern building that, by dint of a masterpiece of design, manages to combine attractiveness with a look that is reminiscent of an oil production platform. The content of the museum offers a fascinating insight into an industry that has not only created a vibrant economy for the city but has an impact on all our lives, whether we like it or not.



A brilliant music theatre production took place in the city's bus terminal