

The Future Bank

Reflection

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Modern industrialised economies are motivated by the demand for sustained growth and the desire for an increase in national wealth, which are also essential tasks of national banks. However, the over-extraction of resources has damaged the earth and caused ecological problems. The project starts at thinking about the roles of national banks in the future development of the economy, cities, and mankind.

The National Bank of Belgium occupied a large, closed block on the edge of lower and upper Brussels. The building complex will become the workplace of the bank's 1500 office-based staff. Moreover, because of the increasingly digital finance and the move out of security function, the bank sees itself as a more open, permeable environment. The bank's transformation aims to invite the public to enter the world of bank.

Therefore, the project aims at two significant targets. The first one is to design workspace for the employees. The office environment is not only the place where people type, talk, and think together, but also part of a network of governance and that engages with the EU, national government, the wider banking infrastructure, cities, and citizens. The design of the social plinth defines the bank as the agent of change and locates the project in a broader social, cultural, natural, or political context.

Research and Design

The research mainly consists of two parts, workplace and social plinth.

The historical development of office buildings was studied by literature research and precedence study. Representative offices since the 1840s were studied and it shows that office design is intertwined with productivity, hierarchy, users' satisfaction, and so on. The early offices were home-like, designed for small businesses. When companies became bigger and more low-status manual workers were hired, scientific management getting popular due to the requirement for efficiency. The workspace was designed higher and larger to allow supervision from the managers. Later, the communication-oriented management that focused on social groups turned into the mainstream. Employees began to seek individual improvement and good personnel relationships at work (Thomas, 2021a). It was the time that the open floor and the landscaped offices emerged. This stage is also closely related to the development of information technology. In modern offices, more aspects were taken into consideration, such as the users' satisfaction with privacy and communication (Haapakangas et al., 2018), allowing employees to decorate the workspace

(Knight & Haslam, 2010), the interaction and distraction in offices (Haynes, 2007), and the improvement in wellbeing after the introduction of plants in offices (Fjeld, 1998).

For the research on Social Plinth, I chose the Chunli Café in Beijing as the main case. The café is really tiny, opened in an old neighbourhood in the central business district of Beijing. By breaking the ground floor facades and adding commercial programs, the cafe redefined the space and stimulated new activities. More 'food windows' were found in other Chinese cities, demonstrating the surprisingly changes food-related activities could make, and the lively public realms created by these small food points.

When I looked back at Willis Faber Dumas Building and Ford Foundation, I realised the positive influence of space for informal meeting and eating, as well as the potential for creating a nice public interior for the city with greenery. I also did research on urban farm, and found the Good Food plan launched in Brussels in 2016, which sets a target of achieving 30 percent of fruit and vegetable production from urban agriculture by 2035. For me, greenery and food-related activity became the two essential approaches to invite the public, and to create better working experience for employees.

Besides, the bank has declared an ambition to adopt the doughnut economic model. In order to build the balance between the social plinth and the ecological ceiling, cooperating with other environmental institutions and engaging the public is crucial. To tackle climate problems, the bank could work with environmental institutions and support clean energy companies at the social and economic levels. It might even foster new environmental institutions within the building complex. On the building scale, however, the bank is capable of dealing with tangible things, such as urban vegetation, food, water, and energy. Compared with abstract, invisible economic measures, gardening and food-related activities are much easier for ordinary people to understand and participate in. It also helps the bank to become more sustainable and self-sufficient.

The future bank is meant to be a meeting place for the city. It provides its users with diverse urban experiences, new skills and knowledge, and is an easy place to access for work, relaxation, eating and learning. Elevated gardens are created in the main bank hall, connect the public programs and lead people up to the citizen terrace on the rooftop. This public interior is proposed as the image of the future bank. For staff, they are encouraged to grow their own vegetables and flowers on the newly added balconies, and to cook and eat with colleagues in the lounges.

Methods

Precedent studies

The studio starts with research on the history and changing culture of office. 16 representative offices and 16 banks were documented, compared, and represented with drawings and large-scale physical models by the whole class. Besides, each of us visited and documented an office space of our own choice, to understand what kind of working environment people actually work in and create for themselves. More precedents for my own projects were studied, such as the Barbican Conservatory, the BBC Scotland Headquarters, Genzyme Center Office Building, etc. To decide the plant list of the interior gardens, the Glass Bubble Greenhouse designed by GORA was chosen as a reference.

Literature research

The purpose of literature research is to study the basics of economic system, to examine the history and changing culture of office space, and to identify the factors that affect employees' productivity and satisfaction to the working environment. Literature on indoor plants and urban farm was added later.

Model making

To understand the city, the site, and the bank building complex, the class collectively research, document, redraw, and digitally and physically build the site and the bank after a collective excursion. Other models for testing and representing the project were also made during the working process.

Wider Context

In general, the main intervention of the project is creating a public realm within the building, a vertical loop and public floors, to allow citizens to wander in the currently closed bank. With various social functions such as gardens, restaurants, exhibition, innovation labs, library, and informal meeting space, the bank could be an exciting meeting space in the city.

Nowadays, economic development and policy making increasingly focus on climate issues and sustainability. The Bank tackles these problems with the introduction of greenery and vegetation, application of detachable timber structures, reuse of construction materials, and creation of micro-climate.

Literature

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