

A Modest Private Public Space

for the Future Bank design

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LAI Yichen

Introduction

When picnic blankets appear in parks, it is a very common scene. But when they appear in the private public space of the bank, it will form a very robust contrast. Authority and disadvantaged, noble and modest, high-tech and low-tech, HSBC Main Building and citizens and picnic blankets on its ground plaza show the coexistence of the two situations.

Perhaps the inspiration of “picnic blankets” to architects is an undesigned, unofficial, modest and non-permanent way of intervention. I tried to apply this modest architectural intervention method to the small-scale residential and commercial district in Taiwan’s specific pedestrian arcade and street. The resulting plant roof and picnic blanket pavement create a place that can engage people.

Banks are semi-public buildings, which play a hybrid role of private institutions and public services. Because of the conflict between the bank and the public, the HSBC Main Building’s plaza was forced to close. So, I hope that in the future design of the National Bank of Belgium, the bank can establish an equal dialogue with the public and continue to improve policies by understanding public opinion. The public can also feel invited when they enter the bank, so that they can express their appeals and communicate with one another with an open mind. Therefore, for the National Bank of Belgium with the bombastic 200 meters facade, can the modest approach achieve my goal? If so, what are the architectural expressions that show modesty? This will be what I want to explore in my graduation project.

Academic positioning

In Amy Thomas's lecture "Bank Architecture", she mentioned that "the bank is a hybrid role of being a private institution and also being a public service. They are not simply corporations, but they occupy a semi-public role. So, there is an interesting ambiguity between public and private."

I would like to divide the public and private issues into three categories. The first type of completely private is the employee's office space. The second type of semi-public is the indoor (usually near the hall) places that provide customers with business services, and the other type is between semi-public and public, which is the sidewalk or corner square that intersects with the general public between the ground floor facade and the urban street. However, this type of space often presents such a situation: "The degradation of public space encourages its replacement by pseudopublic space (public access but private control) as part of a slow expropriation of the city (Dovey, 1992, page 187). "... (forecourts are generally prohibited). Yet the podium is often no more than the foyer and a thinly disguised car-parking structure, without windows overlooking streetlife as in the traditional context (Dovey, 1992, page 185).

When a huge volume of private property occupies a city, they can justify that they have the right to determine the degree of openness

of the ground floor space to the public. However, the streets and squares in the city belong to the citizens. If the private property affects the operation of the civic space, then how to determine this situation? A sign on the street next to a bank in London confirmed this situation: "Private property...no cycling, skateboarding, or roller-blading... (Fig.1)" If pedestrians can use this place, why are other means of transportation prohibited?

Perhaps this has something to do with the symbolic capital. "because symbolic capital must distinguish itself It must define its edges to protect itself as a symbol and to protect itself as investment.... As such it cannot be 'infill' within the urban continuum (Clarke, 1989, page 56)". The Bank must ensure that it symbolizes an image of authority and nobility, so skateboarding and roller-blading that represent "street culture" and "recreational sports" under their definition are not allowed to destroy this image. This kind of image is argued by Dovey (1992, page 173): "The 'politics of the image' brings a new power of the surface to subsume matters of substance". The pursuit of image leads to the separation of architectural form from its social background, and the activities of citizens are limited.



Fig.1



Fig.2

New court Rothschild bank is an investment bank in London designed by OMA. From this promotional photo (Fig. 2) of the ground floor space, you will find that the architecture perfectly interprets the connection between street life (public) and old buildings (urban context). This is also emphasized in the text: "At street level, the entire cube is lifted to create generous pedestrian access to the tall

glass lobby and a covered forecourt that opens a visual passage to St. Stephen's Walbrook and its churchyard... Instead of competing as accidental neighbours, the church and New Court forms a twinned urban ensemble... (OMA, 2011)" However, a closer look shows that a transparent glass guardrail is erected in the middle of the pedestrian passage, and the public is not allowed to pass through.

Pedestrians can only quickly pass through the narrow St. Swithin's lane, glance at the atrium in a few seconds, or stand in the front yard surrounded by the glass lobby carefully for a short time (because they may be watched by the security guard). This well-designed visibility satisfies the image of "openness" and "inclusiveness" that the bank needs, but this image may be just an illusion.

And in this ambiguity between public and privacy, openness and control, how should architects deal with it? "The architect's work as producer of symbolic capital becomes more valuable than ever. However, it is largely stripped of content and placed in the service of capital... Huxtable, on the other hand, while recognising the skyscraper as an economic product, calls on the architect to turn "the economists' calculations into an art form that carries the special freight of responsibility to people and the environment (Huxtable, 1984, page 102 ; Dovey, 1992, page 187)." Furthermore, what is the way this responsibility is expressed in future banks' private public space? Is it a covered forecourt by OMA, a semi-public space negotiated by the architect and the client for the public to use conditionally? Or is it an undefined open square or platform for the citizens to use unconditionally? Or something else?

Perhaps the HSBC Main Building can give architects some inspiration. On weekends, many citizens will be seen sitting on the ground, having picnics and talking in the covered plaza. This is what the architect

envisioned: "A mirrored 'sunscoop' reflects sunlight down through the atrium to the floor of a public plaza below - a sheltered space, which at weekends has become a lively picnic spot (Foster + Partners, 1986)." Behind this phenomenon is a series of strict procedures. First, the architect and HSBC have a vision and are willing to give up the ground and design a special building structure. Secondly, the government and HSBC have agreed that the bank would help the government reclaim the sea and build the dock, and the government would allow the bank to break through the plot ratio. Finally, the government promised that from the Statue Square to the Victoria Harbour by the sea, no buildings will be built to obstruct the HSBC Building.

Whether the reason why the bank is willing to give up the ground space is to reach a series of incentive agreements with the government, this private public space does provide citizens with the opportunity to enjoy urban life in the crowded city. It is worth noting that in the architect's project diary (Norman Foster, 1989), it revealed several ways of using the plaza: pass through, parties, table tennis tournaments and official gatherings. In the hand-painted drawings, most of them are filled with many walking people or parties with temporary tables and chairs provided by the bank. These "official" functions are preset. However, what the bank and architect did not expect is that under a huge institution, there



Fig.3



Fig.4

can also be an “unofficial” public space created by a group of people through picnic blankets (Fig.3).

In 2011, in response to the Occupy Wall Street, some Hong Kong citizens occupied the covered plaza of HSBC to protest financial hegemony and accuse the disadvantages of the capitalist system (Fig.4). In the Anti-

Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement in 2020, the space was closed by the bank, and the private property in front of the door was damaged by protesters.

For the future National Bank of Belgium, in the 2021 “The Bank and its social responsibility” report, they mentioned “We take to heart our social responsibility... We

were already doing that in the past, but mainly behind the scenes and without much publicity. Nonetheless, we concluded that we need to be transparent about the recent radical modernisation of the National Bank's CSR policy, because we want you, as a reader, to be able to gain an idea of everything that we do." Summarize the lessons of the pseudo-public space of some banks and the private public space of HSBC that lost its original intention due to conflicts. If the National Bank of Belgium can take the initiative to provide a platform for the public, where they can easily meet and chat, express their opinions on certain bank policies and issues, and have dialogues with bankers. This kind of equality dialogue allows banks to keep abreast of the latest public opinion and make changes and adjustments to their policies at any time, without causing violent protests.

Reflective problematization

"A public space is a place that is generally open and accessible to people. Roads (including the pavement), public squares, parks and beaches are typically considered public space. To a limited extent, government buildings which are open to the public, such as public libraries are public spaces, although they tend to have restricted areas and greater limits upon use. A privately owned public space is a public space that is open to the public but owned by a private entity

(Wikipedia)." Therefore, this type of space has a wide range of flexibility between public and private.

As a semi-public building, the banks have private public spaces, such as the entrance plaza and the buffer zone between the bottom facade and the sidewalk, which will cause huge differences between public and private due to different stakeholders. The covered front yard with glass fence of the New court Rothschild bank and the common notice "private property, no cycling..." on the square or sidewalk of the bank show that the bank is noble and has a hierarchy with the public. The ground floor plaza of HSBC Main Building is also a private public space, but people can bring picnic blankets and find a place on the plaza to build a comfortable territory. This shows the bank's modest and tolerant attitude towards the public. However, two social movements in 2011 and 2020 caused the bank to temporarily seal the plaza. A lively urban space lost its function due to the conflict between the bank and the public. The two require more equal communication and dialogue.

So, I intend to use a semi-public building type of bank to explore the way in which "authoritative" institution shows a "modest" attitude to establish dialogue with the public.



Fig.5

Methodology

The primary methods will focus on making, including test design, drawing, and modeling of precedents and my own project. Before P1, we used “social plinth” as the starting point for preliminary design ideas. I study the vernacular “pedestrian arcade” in my hometown Taiwan through model making. Pedestrian arcade is a private public space on the ground floor as an extension of the sidewalk. In a certain part of the city, the houses on both sides of the street are not far away and arranged symmetrically, forming a three-partake space between two arcades and the middle street. I put blankets between the three to join them and even the public interior together and cut the street from being the priority. In addition, the nets are placed between the protruding members on the facades of the buildings on both sides to

provide growth opportunities for plants along the arcades and the windowsill on the first floor. A semi-enclosed space with a plant canopy and picnic blankets provides a place for people to gather and communicate (Fig.5). This design reveals how the architect creates a public space in a modest and low-tech way. I will use similar intervention methods in the design of the National Bank of Belgium.

For secondary methods, I will investigate historical archives, theoretical references, and case studies. During the 12th week of the site visit, I will investigate the photos, maps and drawings of the National Bank of Belgium in the Brussels Archives. I will also document its general status by taking photos and drawing sketches. Furthermore, I will also focus on the ground floor plan to indicate the

space available to the public at present. And observe the use of these spaces to find potential places for banks to establish dialogue with the public. Finally, I will study the theoretical references and precedents related to “modest public space”.

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