

Research plan  
*Afterlife office* +  
 2021 11 04

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#### Introduction (275 words)

Superseded by the European central bank, and subject to transformations in the financial-banking sector, the National Bank of Belgium (NBB) has lost a lot of its defining features as a national bank (such as vaults for storing gold and the minting press; all of its secure storage spaces have been/ are being shifted to other facilities). (NBB, 2020) As such, the NBB in 2025 would primarily function as an office building for its 1500 office and research staff. The architectural competition brief for the National bank of Belgium, which forms the basis of the IBC studio's brief, proposes a redevelopment of this precinct in line with this new role.

Apart from dealing with questions of what it means to be a *future bank* (IBC, 2021), this studio brief is seen as an opportunity to investigate the future of existing workspaces. It draws on the readings provided in the studio to speculate an ideal future for the north-european office building -- which has been in a state of flux for a while; accelerated by the ongoing pandemic.

The research component, parallelly, is also an opportunity to continue studying aspects of architectural representation that interest me. Specifically, I wish to critically engage with the drawn artefacts as a means of communicating and producing architecture.

The research plan and activities aim to investigate these multiple threads, with the expectation that they would feed into and inform the design process in an operative way. The two-fold goal with these themes is that they address key gaps in my knowledge as I grapple with this studio brief; whilst simultaneously remaining broader in scope than the specific site/ program/ brief in question.

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#### Academic positioning (1039 words)

In last semester's history thesis course, I wrote about how 'representation' shapes 'reality': the central premise was that the way the architect *draws* influences the built outcome significantly. The paper argues that the use of a certain mode of drawing or the layers of information depicted in them drastically affects the object being designed, as opposed to the conventional understanding of its role as a passive, transparent medium. For example, a reading of Glen Murcutt's heavy use of the *detailed section* results in buildings that are extruded, horizontal structures - and James Stirling's predilection for *axonomies* results in built geometries that often align at 45 degrees.

This paper -- *Representation shapes reality* -- first gives an overview of the history of drawing – which is seen to be closely linked to the history of the architecture profession as we know it today. The overview establishes a historical trajectory and identifies patterns in the use of certain types and modes of drawing. These *types* and *modes* are then analysed in further detail. This part is bookended by an overview of the way architectural historians and theorists like Robin Evans, Edward Robbins, Mario Carpo ... (among others) have examined the role of the drawing. With this background information at hand, the paper studies the work of contemporary architects SANAA and RCR to examine the hypothesis. In my opinion, the case studies I did were not sufficient to establish this link convincingly. In the graduation studio, I hope to continue this trajectory.

To return to the key issue of workplace design, the following paragraphs first look at the historical development and identify issues with the key protagonist: the deep-plan office.

*Office buildings and organizational change* (Duffy, 1980) displays key moments in the historical development of the office typology through a few, specific precedents. These precedents are seen as tangible

results of changing attitudes to managerial organization, real estate markets, the values and aspirations of society at these different points in time. In doing so, the tension between the *architecture* and the forces that shape it are revealed -- questioning the agency of the architect in the production of office space. The author implies that architects are far from being the key protagonists in this process, being relegated to designing 'trivial details' (p.279, Duffy, 1980) for developers and other real estate forces.

As a result, the leaseability/ saleability of office space becomes a key determinant of success. In *Corporate towers and symbolic capital* (Dovey, 1992) the author uses advertisements to explain how symbolic capital -- the 'symbolic, aesthetic, or mythological aura' that surrounds office towers -- is deployed for this purpose. Through a series of categories: *external image, location, foyer, view, interiors ...*, the author illustrates how this 'aura' is created through a combination of skin-deep architecture and creative copywriting, all to disguise the capital-making machine that is the actual structure. These *visible* elements are then given extra attention while the rest is kept at the bare minimum -- seen in how building heights of office floors are reduced as much as possible while the entrance foyer is celebrated. In all of this, going a step ahead than Francis Duffy, Kim Dovey holds architects not just marginalised but complicit. He concludes with a call to action, asking architects and designers to design better cities for the future and not fall prey to 'lucrative self-denial'. (p. 187, Dovey, 1992)

In the European context, the development of the actual workspace coalesces into variations of a repeated deep-plan floorplate, typically around 15-20m, arranged in large vertical or horizontal structures. (Meel, 2000) This is an evolved version of even deeper buildings in the past: the Osram building by Waltern Henn, built in 1965, a 'canonical' precedent studied in the studio, is a perfect example of this. This architecture is an outcome of advancements made in technology over the course of the 20th century to allow lighting, ventilation, circulation and other services at this scale. (Duffy, 1980)

The deep-plan and its associations with the emergence of neo-liberalism and notions of flexibility (in the British context) are studied in *The political economy of flexibility*. (Thomas, 2019) The author refers to Francis Duffy / DEGW's research into envisaging the office building as a series of temporal layers: *shell, services, scenery, sets* -- that can adapt to changing needs and uses. It explicitly establishes a 50 year lifetime for the actual building shell. in *Obsolescence: An Architectural History* (Abramson, 2016) the benchmark preceding this norm is seen to be anything from a few decades to a few years -- buildings torn down and replaced at their prime to serve newer requirements that challenged the constraints of their rigid construction in some form or another.

This proved to be a very effective formula, becoming the go-to strategy for office buildings thereon. In this way, DEGW's legacy continues in the proliferation of flexible deep-plan buildings with optimized services across the globe. After the 2008 financial crash, India (particularly the Delhi - national capital region) became the stage for globalised architectural practices/ corporate design specialists, egged on by predatory multinational capital. (Dharia, 2014) An example close to my home is the DLF Cyberpark, a 250 x 50 x 50m behemoth that comically dwarfs its surroundings -- it is the epitome of *form follows finance*.

In today's world, office space is increasingly becoming less relevant or desirable. As an architect faced with a design challenge to redevelop a structure that includes a fair amount of unused/ empty office space, this is especially relevant. In the UK, the problem of excess office space necessitated policy intervention. 'Office-to-resi' regulations of 2014 allowed developers to convert this space into apartments to be able to recover their investments. While it sounds like a good idea in theory, it has had mixed outcomes: very little attention is paid to how the units work. Small apartments are carved out of deep plan buildings, some remain windowless and unventilated. (Park, 2018)

Elsewhere, deep courtyards are carved out of such buildings to bring in light and ventilation. The Osram building was to be re-used in this way in an architectural 2015 proposal by Muck-Petzet; with a hollowed-out lightwell making small studio apartments possible. This proposal was recently rejected in favour of its demolition and replacement by newer, RoI-friendly buildings by Ortner & Ortner, in 2021.

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### Reflective problematization (717 words)

Both of these examples paint a picture of the world we're headed in at the behest of financial forces at the helm. The deep-plan office resists attempts to use it for any other purpose than commercial; necessitating heavy interventions to convert them. Even then, the outcome falls short of being ideal. Demolition and replacement seems to be the de-facto solution, and is indeed the fate that awaits most of these buildings. This is an obvious concern seen in the context of the enormous weight the construction industry puts on the plant's resources and climate.

The downward trend of office space demand is compounded by the ongoing pandemic, and some voices herald an imminent commercial real estate bubble-burst (Colombo, 2020). Faced with this reality, the deep-plan office has to adapt -- just to live out its expected 50 year lifespan, or perish. This paradoxical outcome of 'flexible' design as rigid, inflexible spaces -- is seen as a central concern of this research direction. The ubiquity of this type of architecture highlights the need to study and review strategies to ameliorate this condition.

As a counterpoint to the deep-plan, *The architecture of the city* (p.46, Rossi, 1982) reminds us to critique 'naive functionalism'. In schemes like the Gallarate quarter, the architect uses a concept he terms 'distributive indifference' to compose spaces that are not functionally predetermined -- or generic, in a sense. This is informed by his study of historic buildings that outlast functions they were made for, and in how their transformation allows 'maximum functional freedom'. (Rossi, 1970)

This variety cannot be imagined for the deep-plan office -- it lacks the multiplicity inherent in the kind of buildings Aldo Rossi talks about. The factors that shape this are the building depth, structure, height, circulation paths, the way the services are organized. In a similar vein, Herman Hertzberger talks about 'polyvalence' as a quality that allows spaces to be interpreted and used in different ways (Hertzberger, 2014). This is particularly important when one looks at the rapid changes that offices are expected to undertake post-pandemic (Davis, 2021), going as far as live-work hybrids. (Bochinska & Katz, 2020)

Another aspect brought on by the sheer scale of the NBB's site and program is the degree to which the open spaces within it are accessible. Looking at precedents like the Economist building by Peter and Allison Smithson, or the India Habitat Centre by Joseph Stein, suggest an alternative where the city is brought into the site, blurring the edges in between them. In the IHC, the building gives back to the city by interspersing public programs like auditoria, restaurants, halls, and galleries. The result is a diverse environment for both the office workers and the public. (Bahga & Raheja, 2019) Aldo van Eyck and Piet Blom talk about the reflexive relationship between the building and city, and propose multiple strategies. (Jaschke, 2008).

To summarize, the research would investigate the typological possibilities and advantageous functional adjacencies of an ideal office building. This building would thus perhaps not only be able to be adapted for other uses -- rendering the structure useful for much longer, but also have to contain a lively mix of functions and activities that interact with the city around and within it, by taking advantage of the polyvalence/ multiplicity baked into its architecture. This does not have to mean an endless cycle of heavy construction interventions; kinetic, temporary interventions could be employed against the structure to allow new possibilities and meanings. (Mehrotra, 2008) It would try to extract key lessons from case studies and precedents, and be applicable for both new-build and reuse of existing structures.

For the parallel trajectory of the analysis of drawings: the research component would focus on Office KGDVS and Harquitectes. They are both contemporary European practices, whose work has been published by El Croquis as monographs (El Croquis 203 and 185)(additionally, Harquitectes is going to be present at the BK faculty in December to give a lecture of their work). They produce very different architecture; and my contention is that an in-depth analysis of the way they draw will show how the representation parallels this fact. At a first glance, the *conceptual* KGDVS draws pared back and abstract - almost diagrammatic - drawings to explain their work; which contrasts the way *pragmatic and restrained* Harquitectes draw extremely precise and detailed drawings.

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## Methodology (357 words)

The goal, with the analysis of their drawings, is to establish the basic premise/ hypothesis that I started with last semester, but also to learn from these architects via the proxy of careful analysis of their drawings. The drawings are seen as a device that draws from different fields of information, bringing them all together in one place to bear on the architectural object. In this regard, I see this work in the same vein as *Comments on drawings of 20 current architects* (Moneo & Cortés, 1976) which went on to become an instructive, pedagogic tool.

With the *afterlife office* research, the first step is to identify appropriate case studies and precedents to study the ideas of *multiplicity* and *polyvalence* in depth. While this would no doubt include the work of their respective authors, it would expand to include other instances where one sees these characteristics. Parallely, case studies of architecture where office program exists alongside other functions would illustrate real-world strategies in building organization. Examples of repurposed existing office spaces would be particularly helpful in this regard.

These case studies are expected to be condensed into a series of operative architectural strategies; or a tool-kit that can be used in the studio project (and also, beyond it). This tool-kit would have to be assessed relatively along a series of criteria/ metrics like *cost, context, complexity, effectiveness...* to ascertain their applicability. For instance, the live-work model proposed in *The case for live-work buildings* (Bochinska & Katz, 2020) is reductive and simple enough to be universal, even though it remains deeply rooted to its American/ New York context in the way its plan is organized and its building envelop interacts with the city and street. Similar arguments could be made about the Korean Officetel, which combines living quarters with workspaces in mix-use buildings. (Baek & Gohaud, 2017)

As stated before, the expectation is that this research can become a resource for me, not for just the studio project at hand, but also inform my future practice. The DLF Cyberpark is a reminder that grappling with the afterlife of the deep-plan office is a far-reaching/ potentially universal design problem worthy of study.

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