

Future Bank

Reflection

Interiors Buildings Cities, 2021-2022

LAI Yichen

5285755

Introduction

The graduation project “Future Bank” is the renovation of the public and office spaces of the National Bank of Belgium. The studio raises questions about “means by which the bank could engage both the public and its own staff in this process of transformation”. It leads me to investigate urban spaces and existing architectural spaces, as well as the types and qualities of space that might successfully accommodate and engage them. After this, I found that the current bank building, as a remnant of the historical period, is very closed and no longer fits the image that the contemporary Belgium National Bank wants to present to the outside world. Therefore, opening up the bank section as a public domain in the city and facilitating the communication between this national institution and citizens became an important issue in my design.

Research and Design

After studying the readings and lectures given by the studio, I became interested in the topic of “private public space”. I divided the public space of the bank into three categories, one is the space completely open to the public, the second is the external business space of the bank, and the third is the public space used by the employees in the office area. Then I started my research on the city of Brussels, where the main façade of the bank, Boulevard de Berlaimont, is located on the border between the upper and lower city. To the west (towards the lower city), there are mostly residential areas and highly mixed areas, with a large flow of people and a strong business atmosphere. To the east (towards the upper city) is the location of Brussels Palace, and there are many administration areas, with a more serious atmosphere. The bank occupies an area of almost 20,000 square meters at this boundary, so I wanted to open up part of the area to connect the 9-meter height difference between this closed and huge triangle.

Then I studied the bank's report 2020 “The Bank and its social responsibility”, which mentioned that “we must take account of trends in society and the public debate...we need to be transparent about the recent radical modernisation of the National Bank’ s CSR policy, because we want you to be able to gain an idea of everything that we do.” This shows that the bank has some modern research results and needs for external exchanges. It also makes the idea of opening part of the area as a public space more convincing. I define the first type of public space as the finance culture center, with exhibitions and the library to showcase the

bank's research. It can be used by employees, a large number of other bank employees in the surrounding area, and any citizen who is interested in financial topics. Because the path connecting the upper and lower city passes through the lobby in the northern half and the east-west building in the middle of the block, the location of the finance culture center is planned as the northern half of the ground floor. The southern half of the hall is the external business area of the bank.

In social plinth research, I create a new character for public space through a simple transformation of the paving of "Taiwan vernacular pedestrian arcade and street". So "through simple methods but making a huge change to the space" became my direction to transform the bank. In the early stage of design (P2 stage), I also used the same method of changing the flooring, designating several areas different from the direction of the hall to break the monotony of the existing space. After a few weeks of experimentation, this approach was not successful. This is because the change of paving is suitable for the 5 meters scale of "Taiwan vernacular pedestrian arcade and street", but is obviously too insignificant for the huge 200 meters space of the bank. So I proceeded to study historical photos, current photos and technical drawings. I found that the space on the ground floor of the bank had a lot of partition walls, and they all solve vertical traffic through the core system. This does not fit into the open plan and circulation of a contemporary building. So I turned to a larger scale of architectural elements: stairs and ramps to transform the existing space and connect the upper and lower city.

Since the ground floor is divided into the finance culture center and the external affairs of the bank, I added new entrances to the two corners of Boulevard de Berlaimont. Therefore, the ramp connecting the 0-meter elevation of the hall and the negative 1.2-meter elevation of the entrance brings people to the center of the hall, which is different from the existing stairs that take people to the end of the hall. The four ramps provide a means of roaming into the building, activating the front of the bank. Furthermore, two east-west stairs with a gentle slope solve the 8-meter height difference, and the third staircase on the roof of the auditorium connects all the public areas on the ground floor and mezzanine in the northern half. As a result, the new circulation of the "public landscape system" completely changes the spatial organization of the bank. This also responds to the idea of "through simple methods but making a huge change to the space", as I did not demolish a lot of the building.

The bank's existing office area consisted of an 80 meters long corridor with many small rooms on either side. This limited communication between employees. The idea came from “breaking the existing trend by creating spaces in another direction and creating new relations” in my social plinth exercise. Taking the west office space as an example, I inserted two communal coffee break areas into the 80 meters long space, dividing the space into three groups. Each group has rooms and an open office area to respond to different office needs. Each common area extends a 4-meter balcony into the greenhouse. Twenty new balconies and open walls illustrate the east-west orientation of the office areas and their visual communication with the old bank to the east. So the four-story greenhouse, which was originally unused and the buildings in the block were activated.

As a result, the “public landscape system” and the “office public system” have realized the east-west communication in terms of circulation and sight. They connected the originally closed triangular block with the city, and also connected the three-sided buildings in the block that were separated by different construction years.

Wider social context

In general, the results of the architectural renovation design for this project come from research on the city, existing spaces, social plinth exercises and literature reading. Belgium National Bank has a certain economic base and social responsibility, and should be able to accommodate specific public activities. It can be the finance culture center where citizens can exchange and learn about the country's economic policies, a “bank” where people can go to the counter to do business, or a knowledge center where 1,500 bank employees can type, talk and think together. Through the establishment of the security line, these places coexist in one block, the bank can meet the needs of external publicity and communication, and citizens can also have an understanding of the “national economy” that is closely related to their own lives.