

# Research Plan

*Interiors Buildings Cities*  
The Palace - Graduation studio

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## Introduction

### P1 statement

Precariousness is a problem concerning an increasing number of people in our society. Everybody can be affected. We often look down on these people and wonder how they ended up there, hoping to never be in their position. Necessary aid and resources are available within the city as well as the workforce, but are dispersed. What if they were to be centralized to encourage collaboration and give people a place to go to?

A central space in the city, easily accessible and large enough to decently accommodate all people. A space they wouldn't feel ashamed to frequent and a space people seek the help they deserve.

The National Help Center is a space for everybody needing help in Brussels. It is a safe zone. By taking over an underused space in the National Bank of Belgium, I wanted to offer a welcoming space for the people that need it the most. A social plinth that connects the most sensitive people to our society. All kinds of services would be available in this building. From a social connection to financial advice to cultural relations. You can get a coffee, speak to people, take a shower, learn how to cook and speak another language without judgment. Every citizen is welcome to occupy this space. It would become a social plinth for the city. The establishment would be accessible at all times, and its open doors would be an invitation to a fairer world.

Thinking about the Public Plinth exercise made me realize the importance of taking into consideration society as a whole and having social spaces. "the social infrastructure is just as important as the critical network we've always prioritized" (Klinenberg, E. 2020). Maybe the bank could evolve into a "palace" for the people? The National Bank of Belgium could be the start of a new kind of bank, a mediating monument, a space for empathy and opportunities.



Figure 1: Picture of the National Help Center's model

## Compilation of reading responses

### Week 2

#### Spain, Daphne "Gender Space Architecture" (1985)

As Daphne Spain explains in her book, women typically occupy clerk and secretary positions and work in open spaces. Which is in the author opinion limiting knowledge, access to decisions as well as status (Spain, D p 119). One exception is the administrator's secretary, who has direct access to the manager, expertise and decisions. Men often occupy positions of power. They work in closed and private offices where the decisions are taken while the women are "gate-keeping" their office (Spain, D p 121). The ability to have access to knowledge and expertise is a spatial issue. For the author, women's situation in open spaces prevents them to access higher positions. While office landscaping was an attempt at more equalitarian space, managers always found a way to enjoy more privacy than the rest of the employees.

Although it is accurate that men have historically been more present in the work environment than women, the situation has evolved. Genders are not segregated anymore, and women have the liberty to choose their profession. The transfer of knowledge in my opinion happens organically as a result of collaboration and is not dictated by the environment. The picture portrayed by the author might not be as dualistic nowadays as it formerly was.

#### Duffy, Francis "Office buildings and organizational change" (1980)

Through the comparison of a few office buildings, Francis Duffy is exploring factors influencing office buildings as well as their evolution. He developed a few questions to structure his research in order to guide his inquiry. A combination of internal factors like office technology, office organization, building construction, socio-technical systems as well as some external factors like building technology and real estate all play a role in the variety of office buildings (Duffy, F p 258). For the author, the diversity of office buildings caused by external and internal factors alike but most interestingly comes from the conflict between them (Duffy, S p278). Internal organization and management style against real estate. The office's buildings presented in the text symbolize the society they were built in more than anything else.

The way we live and operate drastically changed through time. Technological progress as well societal evolution has transformed the workspaces and offices. Companies represent their value as well as their social and financial status through their headquarters or offices. Ultimately office buildings are production spaces driven by productivity and financial gains, hierarchy and efficiency.



Figure 2: German Quickborner Team's approach to Bürolandschaft

### Week 3

*Dovey, Kim. "Corporate towers and symbolic capital" (1992)*

Office towers are seen as a symbol of power and capitalism in the landscape. Through the comparison of office building advertisements in Melbourne, the author Kim Dovey analyses the diverse key elements of the corporate towers. Architects are looking to design unique and authentic masterpieces. The inside is as carefully crafted as the outside. The tower should be ideally established and in "the very best of company" (Dovey, K. p180) but still, need to stand out. This ambiguity leads to the clustering of office towers and therefore the loss of the expensive view. The foyer will convey the first impression to the visitor. It is a stage for the company and is designed to impress and intimidate as well as transmit the values of the corporation. The executive office and boardroom are designed with a very masculine, conservative tone. They procure valued views on the environment while many employees are working in the "engine" of the company in a generic space often without any windows.

This text was written thirty years ago and since then work culture, buildings and designs have evolved. Nonetheless, architects often prefer highly visually impacting buildings to represent their clients and might neglect the comfort and well being of employees.

*Korsch, Sben; Decaudin, Maxime " Market landscape: speaking between Financial District and The Planet"*

This podcast is a discussion between two architectural historians interested in environmental transformation and spaces of finance and multiple participants. The first part is a discussion about the globalization of cities and the financial economy which appeared after the deregulation of 1980. The need for specialized global spaces arose and thus Canary Wharf in London and Central in Hong Kong were created. This globalization is visible also with the luxurious material used coming from all around the world. Gardens are composed to convey the idea of an ecological paradise including trees coming from far away to construct this image. The reality is very far from the image it gives.

The second part covers the distance between banks and the location of their investment. Major financial companies located in Canary Wharf and Hong Kong, for example, fund fossil fuel extraction. These decisions have a significantly negative impact on the population, health, ecology and environment.

Banks don't have an understanding nor want to consider the impact of their investments because they are not in physical proximity of it and don't perceive the impact they have on people's lives.

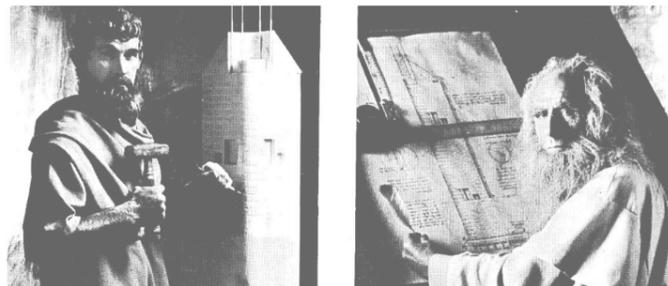


Figure 3: The myth of artistic production.

### Week 4

*Debate on workspaces*

As a capitalist culture, we have grown to spend the majority of our days in offices, and workspaces. Offices evolved through time as society and the work culture evolved. During the readings and lectures, many questions and interesting topics were raised. What is the role of work and the workplace in society? What should offices look like and represent? Do we still need offices after the corona-virus crisis?

The history of offices and workplaces is a record of social issues, gender inequality and the well-being in the professional environment. A combination of an adequate amount of privacy to work and enough proximity to engage collaboration would be ideal in a work environment. Our cities are filled with expensive skyscrapers where corporations play with numbers without realizing they represent people. They play in their glass cages, far away from the ground and the city around them. Companies affairs are private and should remain but offices could be more anchored in the urban life they impact. The verticality of skyscrapers and offices is due to market speculation but it might also be interesting to come back to a more human way of building in an urban context.



Figure 4 : Debate on workplaces

## Week 5

### *Pevsner, Nikolaus 'Exchanges and Banks' in A History of Building Types (1976)*

“Exchanges and banks” is a chapter of the book “A history of building types” written in 1976 by Nikolaus Pevsner.

For Pevsner, building typology refers to the functional aspect of typology more than the morphological aspect. Banks don't have a particular morphological type but are directly related to the context and period they are in. During the Renaissance in Italy, the “bank” was a room in the owner's palazzo. Later, banks adopted the shape of Antique temples to convey the idea of stability and power through their facades and materials. This chapter considers all scales of building, from the chest in a room in Italy during the Renaissance to the maze of the Bank Of London. He establishes his arguments based on history and inserts his own definition of perfection in his time line.

Pevsner, as an art historian, constructed this chapter by giving as much space for text as illustration. The chronological layout of his argument as well as the graphic material presented on each page highlights his argument.

## Week 6

### *Bootstrap, W & van Goor Linda: The basics of money and banking (2020)*

Banks as we know today didn't appear right away but started with merchants bankers before evolving. Money was a tangible currency and it was only possible to have as much money as there was gold available. This was called the gold standard. The first monetary accord between independent countries dates from 1944 with the Bretton Woods system. It established a fixed exchange rate between the USA, Canada and Western Europe. In 2002, the Euro was implemented in Europe to avoid exchange rates and provide more stability to the system. During the 2008 financial crisis in the USA, the interconnection of all economical systems caused lasting effects on the world economy. Nowadays with the rise of the Internet, banking is increasingly done digitally and online and alternative currencies are appearing. Money doesn't retain any tangible meaning anymore and the financial realm is very difficult to navigate.

The European Union is a politico-economic union consisting of 27 countries. Therefore, National Banks don't regulate their country's monetary system but make sure they are aligned with Europe's guidelines. The EU was created to have a financial system more stable and powerful. Other countries have a very different approach and it is very intriguing to see the difference in structures.

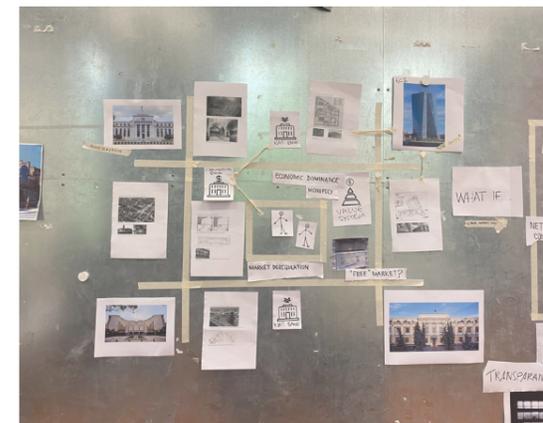


Figure 5 : Postal saving bank of Vienna by Otta Wagner

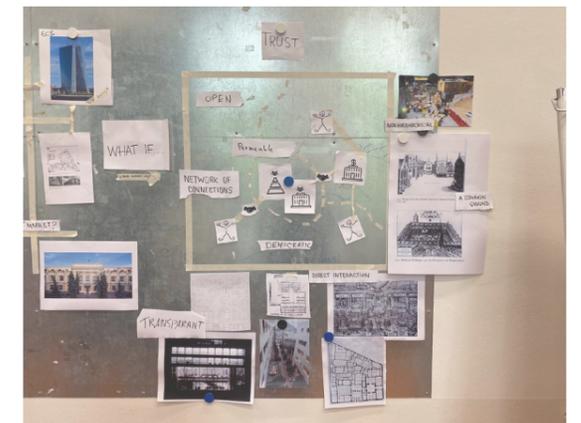
## Week 7

### *Debate on banking*

A few powerful corporations and people have power over the economy. Hidden in their glass cages they play with numbers without realizing or being interested in the fact that they play with people's lives, pensions, dreams but also the environment and our precious resources. The decisions they make in their office don't impact them directly and therefore they don't feel concerned. These gigantic companies which are considered “too big to fail” are backed up by governments who are pouring in money to keep them afloat whenever a crisis hits. They never really suffer the consequences of a financial crisis. The way we do banking nowadays in our capitalist society can't be sustainable. The system is flawed and very difficult for commoners to navigate. What if our society would be less egocentric and focused on amassing money to the detriment of vulnerable people. There must be a way to change the system and work in a more sustainable and human way.



The problem



A possible solution

Figure 6: Debate on banking

## A space for everyone

As a Belgian citizen who has lived in Brussels for a few years, the title of the studio “Palaces” intrigued me. Brussels is the capital of Belgium, but also Europe. As a result of its situation the city profits from an abundance of languages, cultures, religions as well as social and political backgrounds. The city is filled with palaces, places of power and wealth, from present or past times. The title of the studio “Palace” refers to a large public building, a building open for people. The word “Palace” in French means a luxurious hotel. The National Bank of Belgium was not intended for the public but as a functional bank. The building is indeed “open” but only in a very contained way and exclusively for business purposes. The Bank is not, nor tries to be a social space. The bank was designed to be a luxurious and timeless institution through the materials chosen and the monumentality of the spaces. This is visible in the spaces open to the public like the entrance and main hall of the building. Conceivably the bank could become, as a civic institution, the representative of all social, economic and cultural classes and thus a space where these very different worlds would meet.

During my research on the social plinth, I observed the importance of caring for every layer of society and offering spaces for the community. The renovation of the National Bank could represent a significant opportunity to open this institution to the public. The Bank doesn’t require all of the space available and could dedicate it to a more social approach. Architecture is about designing spaces for people, connecting society and bridging the past and the future. The most valuable spaces of the bank would become the public facade of the building. How can the National Bank of Belgium be the start of a new kind of bank, a mediating monument? “Might it also be possible to use the environment to teach change instead of permanence, how the world constantly shifts in the context of the immediate past” (Lynch, K. p.43). It is time to unseal it, rediscover it and transform it for later generations. How can the bank become a bridge between finance, monuments, the city and its people?

## Methodology

How can the National Bank of Belgium become a connection between the city and its citizens, its monuments and financial functions? This research aims to find a new and more open relationship between the city and the bank. As much as this exploration is more towards the social aspect of architecture, it requires a historical and economical foundation. A combination of primary and secondary sources are necessary for this type of research as the experience of the user is equally important as the literature.

First, there is the societal aspect of the National Bank. In order to forge a new connection within its context, it is important to understand the way the building was envisioned and the way it is used by and for people. Its current relationship with the street and city will be investigated as well. For this purpose, interviewing and surveying people about their rapport with the institution and building is crucial. The lecture of publications, articles and books critically viewing the bank will be also important to consider.

Furthermore, the economical function of the Bank and the role it has towards the nation, city and citizens will be analyzed. The role it had when the institution was established, the role it has today and the position the Bank should occupy in the future. It is an opportunity for the National Bank to expand and diversify.

Finally, the history of the bank, already presented in the two other facets of the research to a lesser extent, will be elaborated. It will be interesting to correlate the current building with the previous facilities of the bank as well as their functions. It will also be crucial to explore the existing buildings and to compare all of the interior spaces of the existing bank with drawings and models of the interiors.

By cross-researching and carefully curating all of the material on this topic, I will be apt to develop a program and guidelines for the project on the National Bank, combining the existing functions with a new kind of bank, oriented toward the citizens. A meeting space for people, history and finance.

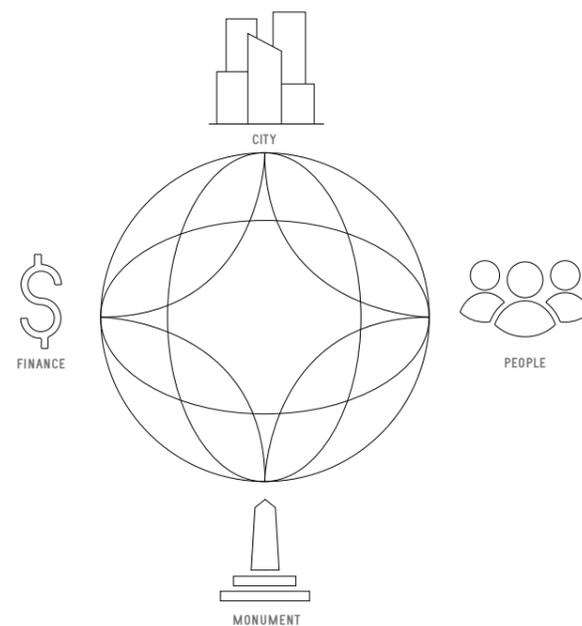


Figure 7: Interconnection of the research's topics

How can the National Bank of Belgium become a connection between the city, every citizens, monuments and finance and create a new kind of social infrastructure for the city ?

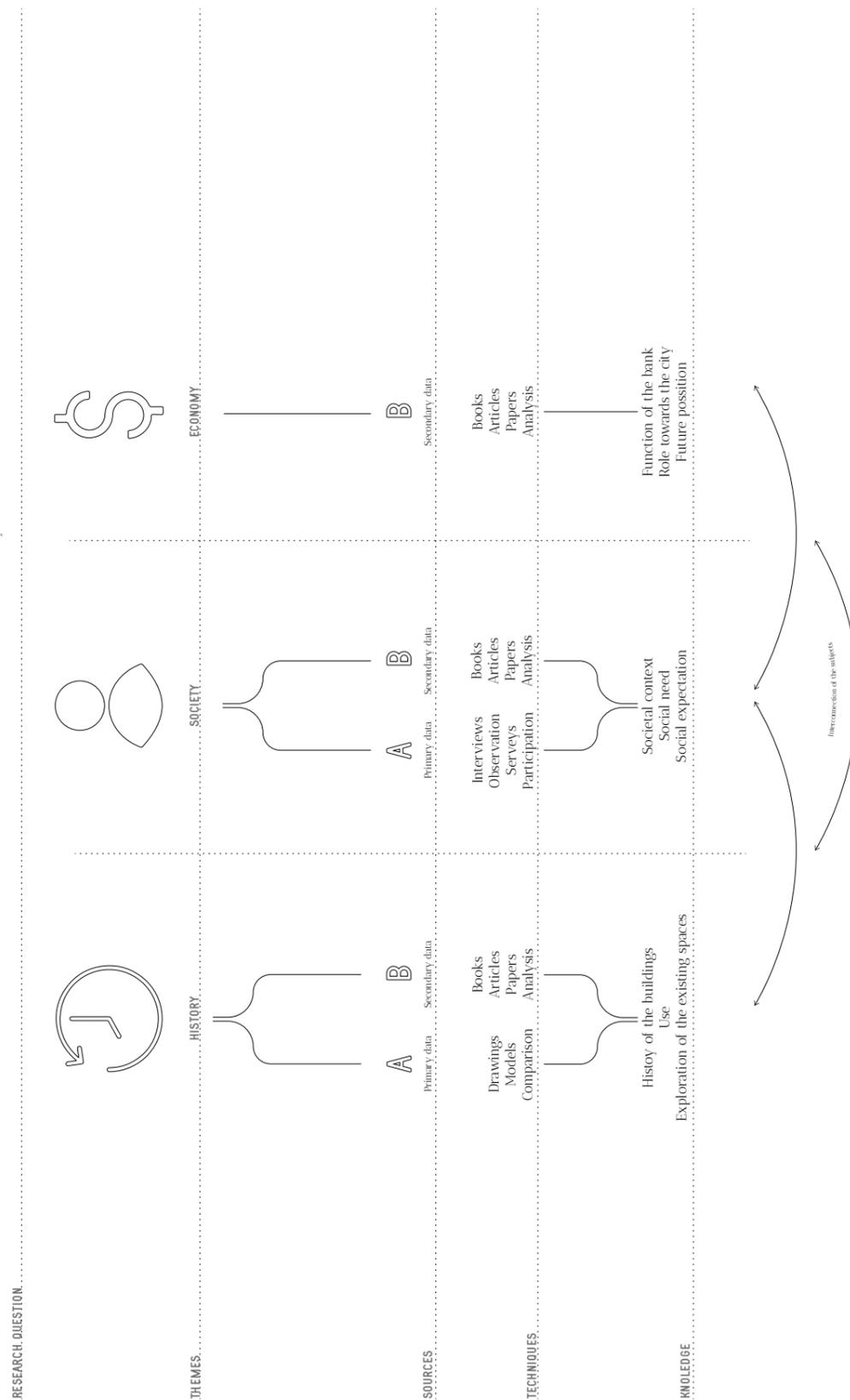


Figure 8: Methodology diagram

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## Figures

Figure 1: *Picture of the National Help Center's model*. Own production

Figure 2: *German Quickborner Team's approach to Bürolandschaft* Retrieved from Spain, D. (2007). *The Contemporary Workplace*. In *Gender space architecture: An interdisciplinary introduction* (pp. 118–127). essay, Routledge.

Figure 3 *The myth of artistic production*. Retrieved from Dovey, K. (1992). *Corporate towers and symbolic capital*. *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design*, 19(2), 173–188. <https://doi.org/10.1068/b190173>

Figure 4: *Crazy wall about the debate on workplaces*. Poduced in groups during the debate

Figure 5: *Postal saving bank of Vienna by Otto Wagner*. Retrieved from Pevsner, N. (1976). *Exchanges and Banks*. In *A history of building types. Essay*, Thames and Hudson.

Figure 6: *crazy wall about the debate on banking*. Produced in groups during the debate.

Figure 7: *Interconnection of the research's topics*. Own production.

Figure 8: *Methodology diagram*. Own production.