

Alternative organizational and economic structures in the future bank: Barters, networks and grassroots definition of value.

General introduction

Future Bank. In these two words there is a plethora of notions to consider: economy, politics, ideology, finance, working, office, knowledge, values, image, hierarchy, society, relationships, organization, management, democracy, equality, gender, tolerance – the list goes on and on. Ideally, I would like to address all of those to some degree and therefore, I determined Systems as an overarching theme in the research conducted thus far and in my future design. According to Cambridge Dictionary, a system is defined as ‘a set of connected things or devices that operate together’ and in this line of thought, I would be particularly interested in the joint action of factors, their interrelation and combined influence.

Repeatedly, during the seminars and provoked by the readings, I was astonished by the gradual uncovering of various links and connections between different notions. Multiple lines of development existed simultaneously and interacted with one another. Beyond my fascination with the complex interdependence of elements, I also came to see processes which are detrimental to us as a society and to the ecosystem; these were, to a large extent, linked to the currently generally applied linear economic model, which favours profit and extraction of goods to no reasonable bounds. Banks, in that regard, play a crucial and often dishonourable role. Investments pour and devastated landscapes grow. ‘Why’ now sounds as a rhetorical question – for profit, of course.

Therefore, with my research and project, I would like to contribute to the idea of sustainability, understood on three levels: environmental, economic and social. Brussels – the centre of a developed country and the second most diverse city in the world, seems the perfect site for that. It is my aim to tackle the problems surrounding the milieu of diverse communities in urban regions and propose spaces that would actively contribute to these communities’ ability to forge a resilient and healthy future for people and the planet. In order to do that, I will use the bank as a stepping stone and mediator, but operate opposite its main tool – money, by creating a contemporary forum for ‘trade’ through non-monetary transactions – barters. I do believe need-and-offer drives something more than the economic apparatus; it can be a foundation for the finding of a common ground and shared values between people.

In a time when everything either comes with a price tag attached or some marketing campaign vehemently trying to convince us of its price, too commonly confused for ‘value’, and a volatile and unpredictable future, money is rather increasingly regarded as quicksand. Indeed, with emerging alternative currencies and an economic model that causes natural calamities regularly, we ought to ask ourselves: why money? What is money worth when our home is on fire?

Academic positioning/lessons learned

As already established, my enduring impression during the courses of the Research seminar can be summed up in one word: **Systems**. The bank is intertwined in an incredibly complex set of systems that act on economic, social and political levels and historical and theoretical frameworks are of vital importance for understanding that.

In Amy Thomas’ *The Political Economy of Flexibility*, I was introduced for the first time to Foucault’s notion of ‘*neoliberal governmentality*’ and I believe that it is the ground zero for understanding today’s situation. I deliberately avoid the specification of the word ‘situation’, because it is a global and

multifaceted phenomenon. The shift that Foucault observed was not just an economic event or a political one, it permeated the very core of our society – it represents a shift in the global framework of thought. It is a value displacement, where competition, interest and investment became the foundation of a newly established corporate culture that slowly replaced the Homo Sapiens with a *Homo Economicus*. Thus, the societal unit – the person, was transformed into an extension of an economic system and as a consequence, the society itself, in my view, was moulded to resemble an economic structure. In other readings, we were familiarized with the practice of Taylorism and the human being seen as an ‘*unit of production*’ (Duffy, 2003).

This is where the second key point comes into play: **Organization**, predominantly utilized in the form of Hierarchy. Acting both on a global and a local scale, hierarchies pervade the world economic space and its direct expression – the office. In an industrial spirit, initially it found its expression in the so-called ‘*scientific management*’, which sought to reduce work to an almost machine-like process. In analysing the precedents and the readings of the seminar, that is more than evident. Control percolates through the veins of corporate establishments in the XX century, first more directly and then subtly concealed in benevolent intentions, but all the same based on data targeting productivity. Even nowadays, from my limited observations, the emphasis in offices, no matter how user-friendly, creativity-boosting and social they aim to appear, remains the same – maximum productivity, maximum profit, maximum utilization of the human capital. Surely, optimisation is not an inherently negative idea, but the goal here remains aligned with a particularly destructive system – the linear economic model. I am interested in exploring anti-hierarchies and using the theoretical framework of libertarian systems as a thought-provoking point of departure for reconsidering the stagnated and rigid hierarchical organization of work and economy.

After the oil crises of the 1970s and the end of the Bretton Woods agreement, that led to a rush of deregulatory processes, among which the so called Big Bang and the creation of global currency markets, the overall political ideology of the developed world was radically changed. State allocation of funds was replaced by a ‘free’ market economy. However, I consider the use of the word ‘free’ in that regard nowadays as merely an attractive catchphrase, as it could hardly be a legitimate definition for a situation of global forces and monopolies. The newly established financial giants, reinforced by the pivotal concepts of neoliberal governmentality, rendered regulation and law rather redundant. Economic influence had infiltrated the political sphere and reconfigured the power dynamic. An example for that is the Global economic crisis of 2007. In the film *The Big Short* (2015), which attempts to explain this phenomenon, we witness the government institutions’ inability to counteract market mechanisms and to avoid disaster. It is my assumption that this is the moment when **Trust** – the very foundation of the bank institution – was obliterated. In the studio we speak of the Central bank’s regulatory function but I cannot help but think: the national banks are a government institution, while governments are often directly linked to commercial banks and influenced by the interests of corporate conglomerates, forming a vicious circle of grappling power structures. In Yanis Varoufakis’ podcast, he describes a financial manoeuvre, facilitated by the EU, that in no way benefits the Greek people but nonetheless was pushed through and implemented. Therefore, I intend to become closely acquainted with the economic situation in Brussels in order to make informed decisions regarding my graduation project.

All that being said, I acknowledge my scepticism towards the system might be heavily influenced by the events in 2007 and the general social climate of distrust generated by it. So, if the system proved to be fraudulent on such a remarkable scale, how could the damage be reversed? How can trust be re-established? As architects, we have a limited set of tools, we are no policy makers and our ideas must often be subliminally communicated. It was in this storm-like volatile landscape of fierce competition some decades ago, that architecture was consciously utilized as a marketing tool to create **Images** (Dovey, 1992). Mythmaking was employed as a method to establish a narrative that legitimizes the ‘values’ surrounding the newly born corporate culture, rendering architects complicit in the creation of

a false and destructive global identity, linked to economic power. There is an inherent connection between images and **Values**, as a function of Images is to evoke Values. Here I deliberately use ‘evoke’, as values themselves are a social phenomenon, a collective construct, which is by no means the creation of a single actor. However, they can be perpetuated by a single entity that has the means to do so in order to achieve a specific agenda, as we have seen numerous times in the global war for financial dominance. Architects, albeit somewhat limited in following an investor’s requests, can also assert a personal social position. They have the ability to exert deliberate influence through created environments that evoke certain connotations. I believe that

‘Dominance’ is a part of the repertoire of notions contained in the concept of Hierarchy, which in turns is nothing more than a form of organization, subdued and constructed by a so-called ‘free’ market system, and, in my opinion, misunderstood as to being still relevant or democratic. Going back to the very roots of banking and exchanges, as demonstrated by Pevsner’s *A History of Building Types*, we see trade and finance as an almost domestic activity at first, then a common ground that transcends political agendas and national borders and is based on mutual trust. **Money** was originally necessary for exchange of goods or services, conceived as a tool facilitating the process, but nonetheless not to be an end goal in itself. However, a profit-oriented market took the absolute contrary stance in that matter. This is also one of the reasons why I would like to conceive a ‘no-money’ space in my project proposal – to assert dialogue and mutual understanding as a legitimate channel for exchange based on shared values rather than externally imposed quantification system, that money is.

Nowadays, value-based banks, alternative currencies, emerging financial instruments and modes of investment are just a few of the examples of the changing financial landscape. It is hard for me to say or make speculations yet on the impact of those new ideas on us, as a society, and on the planet as an ecosystem. What I do know though, is that climate change has become the worldwide alarm ringing danger and calling for a radical rethinking of our ways. We can no longer think ourselves separate from the ecosystem or continue sustaining abstract notions, such as money, as the main guiding factor in decision making. Yanis Varoufakis’ *Another Now* was a breath of fresh air in a world scene so stagnated from ideas more than half a century old and still clutching for dominance. By no means am I implying the invention of new political or ideological schemes, but rather urging towards the re-evaluation of the current ones in order to have a value system that is relevant to the contemporary world.

Reflective problematization

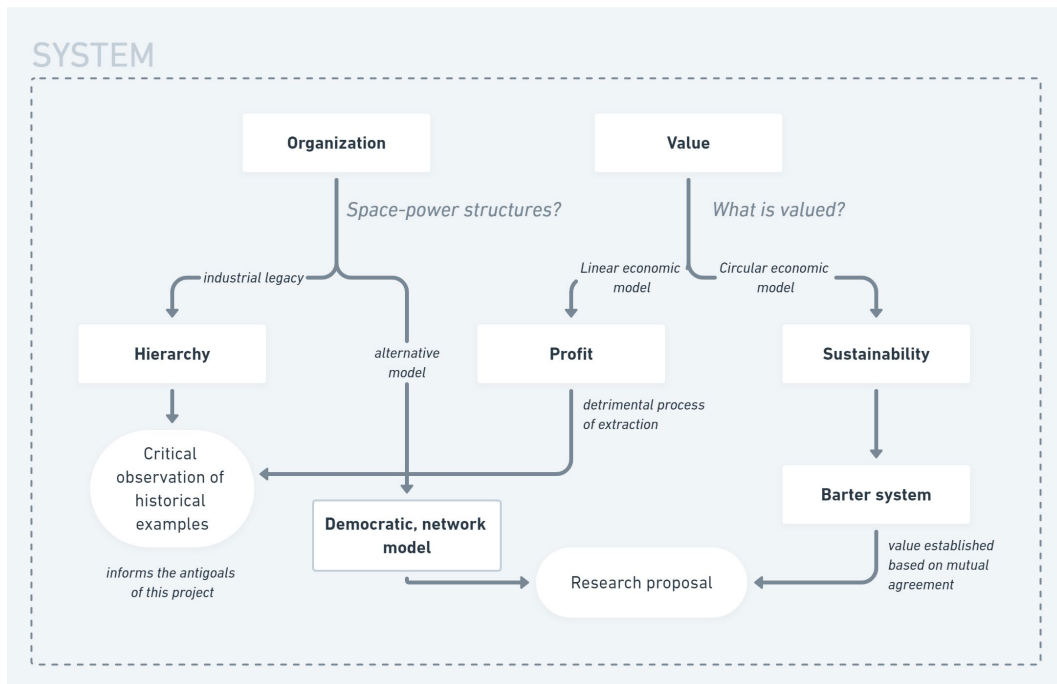


Fig. 1.

Systems that draw the links between Organization, Value and Money constitute the area of interest, that I will question and rethink through my project, with a principal focus on their impact on society, understood in the multiplicity of stakeholders involved in the process – from producers to users, from the active actors to the outwardly uninvolved bystanders. My observations and reasons for this choice are described in the previous parts.

I would like to target the notion of organization as a vertical structure based on mediated and controlled contact between its members, as already seen in the reviewed group precedents, and research alternative options instead. What would a non-hierarchical organisation look like in architectural terms? How could such a structure be implemented in the context of offices, the bank and, perhaps, in the public space? For this purpose, I intend to critically analyse the collective case studies and contemporary office and bank projects, and compare them.

Furthermore, I would like to question the status of money and instead appeal to values established via personal communication, working towards the rebuilding of trust not just between the institution of the National bank and the people but also between separate members of diverse communities. I aspire to restore human dialogue in a sphere long defined by numbers. How could ‘trade’ – of goods, services, knowledge, time – between people become a stepping stone for acknowledgement, communication, understanding and recognition of ‘others’ in the urban realm? Does the circular economic model put forward values that could overthrow ‘profit’ as the main goal and achieve this? Could a barter system become a tool in service of such values and what role could it play in the future bank?

And, above all, I am interested in the connection and potential dynamic between these two: how could a different configuration of organization aid the formation of a dialogue between different actors and contribute towards the establishment of contemporary and shared values?

Methodology

I would like to conduct my research by employing three strategies, at times simultaneously.

1. Literature. *Theoretical dimension*

1.1 I will begin by making an annotated bibliography with works, dealing with subjects relevant to my research question/s. I believe this would help me gain an overall idea of the theoretical framework of the notions that interest me, and perhaps even direct my attention to themes or issues I did not think of initially. I consider this wide-scope approach especially important in the beginning of research because it is relatively quick, allows for flexibility and delivers information from a wider scope of fields.

1.2 I will proceed with a literature review of a critical selection of works. This would allow me to develop in-depth understanding of the specific notions and thus create the necessary framework for me to seek patterns and correlations between various factors. Here I would like to refer to Stavros Kousoulas lecture on problematization: my goal is to understand the existing structure of certain processes, how they happen, what they were intended to do and what is their actual impact, so that I can pinpoint the crucial points in that mechanism and consciously and deliberately utilize it in an alternative manner that is in accordance with the objectives of my design proposal.

2. Dialogue. *Social dimension*

2.1 I would like to use social platforms, such as internet forums, groups, boards, and also contact specific academics and professionals in order to conduct interviews, focused on questions, related to my research, e.g. workplace organization, impression of perceived hierarchical structures, alternative economic systems, the bank's role in a circular economic model.

2.2 Afterwards, would like to graphically systematize this data and use it to inform my theoretical positioning and future design.

3. Case study analysis. *Architectural dimension*

a) Space and power relations

I will pinpoint examples of key organizational structures, beginning with the group precedents, with regard to their spatial and historical context, and create a catalogue, representing power relations that are embedded in architecture. I would like to discuss those in two ways: first – through a historic chronological analysis, and second - in terms of possible thematic groupings and their comparison. I believe this method would give me an understanding of the tangible manifestation of organizational structures in the built environment. The creation of such a database would inform my future design proposal about specific strategies and gestures employed to convey ideas of organization and the logic behind them.

b) Public gestures of commercial undertakings

I will explore the urban dimension of the selected precedents, how the urban realm is regarded in terms of the created semi-public or public space, the social life hosted there and the resulting effects.

c) Agora, Forum, Marketplace?

I will research the prototypical market as an economic and social place in order to understand its potential application in my design proposal.

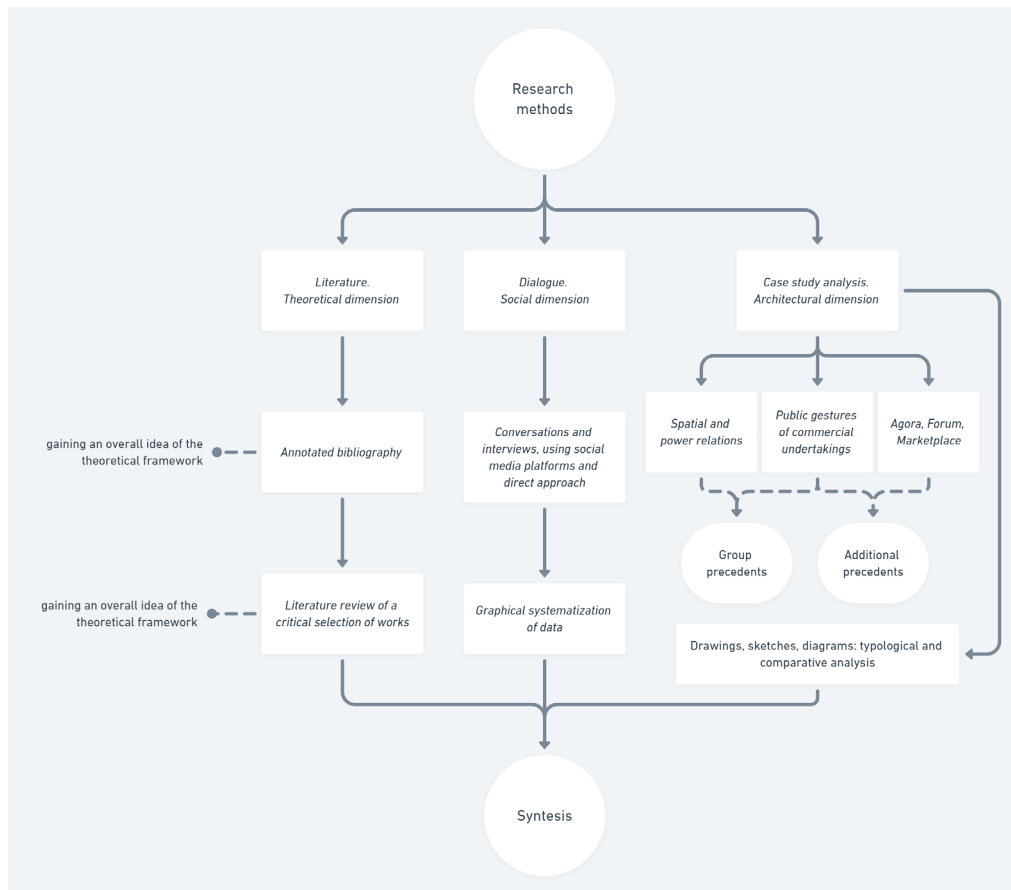


Fig. 2. Diagram

Bibliography

Disclaimer: in this bibliography are listed the readings that I have come across, read completely or partially, and that have had an impact on the formation of my current interests with regard to the Graduation Project. This is not a preliminary bibliographical list for the research I have yet to conduct. However, I do believe I will continue to reference some of those works in my future research.

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