

Graduation Project  
Reflection Paper Graduation Studio,

National Bank of Belgium  
Interior Buildings Cities

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## **Introduction**

The brief of this year's studio addresses the National Bank of Belgium located on the border of upper and lower parts of Brussels. The current fortress like megastructure that the bank occupies is imposing power and solidity, but is closing itself completely from the public. With the traditional role of the bank such as printing and storage of currency being relocated outside of the city and finance transitioning to virtual mediums, the National Bank of Belgium seeks to both redefine itself physically and at the same time rethink its role in the society.

## **Relationship between research and design**

As the city of Brussels has declared itself a doughnut economy, the future national bank should be taking into consideration the environmental impact that this project will have but also its future consumption. The future bank is a catalyst of change which would affect the city in various scales - through the future economy, society's attitude and awareness and hopefully set an example to be followed by other institutions.

Before starting to analyse the existing megastructure it was important to understand what is the role of the national bank and how this building is used now and how it will be used in the future. The national bank is responsible for printing banknotes and placing in circulation coins and notes. However, with the new project for the bank this program is not going to take place in this building. The bank ensures economic stability, sets interest rates and lends money to the commercial banks which are then going to the public. The banks states it is "as an institution promoting the public interest, the National Bank performs numerous services for individuals", however, the new brief and when we visited the bank it was quite the opposite. The public was not welcomed, nor will be in the future according to their brief. There was one open counter for money exchange in the whole Bank. The national bank of Belgium currently is a closed institution where the public is kept outside by the strong boundaries of the building edge.

However, the bank typology back in the time was not always this closed and private institution. My research originated with looking at precedents of the bank typology and how it operated back in the time. Starting from the first stock exchanges in Antwerp and London which were built for the merchants and bankers. The architectural scheme was different - an open space surrounded by cloisters. It was a place where bankers would meet to discuss business, government and individual debts. It was a place of exchange, where the public was invited to enter. Therefore, I started looking and studying how to bring this model of the bank institution back.

The city of Brussels has declared itself a doughnut economy. Therefore, I asked myself the question what is there to be done to positively influence this model and where is it lacking attention at the moment so the bank could respond to this. The national bank is an institution that sets an example and therefore is therefore socially responsible. This is also one of the core values for the institution. Moreover, social equality and justice are among the foundation of the doughnut economy model which the bank has to strive for. However, currently the national bank is merely touching upon this aspects of the model.

After doing my research, looking at the responsibilities of the national bank and the future goals that we must strive for, I concluded that the national bank fails to positively contribute to the above stated core values, fails to fulfil its mission as a socially responsible and inclusive institution. Moreover, the money-based market system fails to reward many types of critical work—the work of building strong communities, revitalising neighbourhoods, preserving the environment, advancing social justice, and sustaining democracy.

In order to meet these societal, environmental needs, my proposal for the national bank of Belgium is to offer opportunities for fostering more equitable and inclusive economic order alongside with the money-based market within the institution. This way the bank typology goes back to its roots and once again becomes a place of exchange for the public. An exchange of values, knowledge, skills, experience, time. The bank accommodates different alternatives of dealing with the value of things. If we are going to actually rethink the economy in our society, then the idea of fostering alternative banking such as time banking, using local currencies, community banking, community funding bartering in the National Bank of Belgium is already a beginning of putting an emphasis on the fact that there is value in other things apart from money.

The national bank becomes an inclusive space without hierarchies where people are welcomed to express themselves, take part into the alternative banking, protest even by being part of the what might be called a city forum. The project for the national bank aims to engage citizens to come together to form communities and to take part in the micro banking. It is a democratic place where everyone is welcomed. It becomes a more transparent and active institution which fosters other monetary systems apart from the money based one. The national bank becomes an active part of the citizen's daily life and not just for its employees as it was functioning until now. The new design offers an active edge where the public is invited. It is no longer a fully enclosed megastructure with fences

on its edges and no activities on the plinth. The monumental 200 metres facade now transforms into a permeable edge with visibility towards the banking hall. The iconic banking hall opens to the public and accommodates alternative monetary systems, hosts organisations which strive for social justice and environmental protection and at the same time gives opportunities for various forms of exchange both for the public and the employees of the bank. The bank remains publicly accessible on the ground levels all around the block from the street level. The banking hall becomes a public interior which makes a visual connection the offices of the bank as well through the new atrium core designed. It aims to unite the two banking halls and give the opportunity to the public to see how the employees of the national bank occupy their offices.

Due to the fact that the bank acquires a new role and function, in my design the bank acquires a new face as well. The back facades which were previously enclosed in various non-functioning small courtyards, now become new faces to the bank. As the alternative banking is accommodated on the ground floor towards boulevard de Berlaimont, the employee entrance is positioned on the level above and is accessed from the the once back facade of the main 200 metres long block. In this way the national security of the bank is kept without the need of high fences and solid boundaries.

The courtyards which were previously used only for truck entryway, are now part of the city forum. They are well integrated in the design by their change of level as one is turned into a garden which is continuation of the banking hall level. The second courtyard becomes a new meeting point, as it is levelled with the street and all new entrances towards the bank building and the rental offices is provided.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the proposed design comes together from the research on alternative monetary system, societal issues nowadays, social plinth study, and office and bank precedents which have successfully started off these typologies. The National Bank of Belgium becomes an open institution which gives opportunities for citizens to take part of micro banking activities, supports and gives out space where they can express themselves and exchange valuable things different from money only. It becomes a centre of social activities where people support each other and feel safe in a democratic place without any hierarchies without disturbing the private bank's office environment. This project is an attempt to bring back the bank typology as it originated, where everyone was involved in the inclusive exchange of valuable physical and non-physical matters. Overall, my research process has been very insightful for my design, it allowed me to reach some conclusions as well as offering me different approaches on how to deal with existing building of such importance.