

## **1. Introduction**

The dynamic corporate world establishes a disconnection between the social nature of the human, their work obligations and more importantly their well-being and comfort. There has been a tendency of invisible control, comfort according to a rank and slow transition of the human into a machine like experiment. In order to remove this huge gap between the institution, its workers and the public, my goal for the central bank is to establish a democratic base for communication, social exchange and connection between the individuals and the institution. While the courtyard of the bank in the past was a place of exchange and it was slowly replaced by the private banking hall, I believe the bank plinth should return back to its typology basis in order to once again create prerequisites for social action, interaction and knowledge exchange.

The ground floor of the building or the plinth of one structure is often considered as a separate entity both from the city network and from the building block. Where in reality I think the social plinth must be part of the urban plan and an extension to the city morphology. After an analysis of the Bank of England by Soane, the souk typology and pieces of the urban tissue of Brussels, with my groupmate we developed a social plinth as a miniature replication of the city. It is a network of spaces connected to each other, as well as to the street life and the building itself. It is an experience of perceiving different scales and materials as one walks through the city, passing through intimate corners, crowded transit streets, collective rooms where social interaction and public life are fostered.

As the social plinth strengthens the role of the bank as a communicator and mediator, it is essential to think about how this could be translated within the workspace as well. The central bank has to be designed as a social platform both on street level and within.

## **2. Academic positioning / lessons learned**

Interestingly enough and quite logically, both the office typology and the bank take their roots from the domestic architecture since it was the predominant typology in the early 17th century. Among the first presented offices by Francis Duffy in his text *Office buildings and organisational change* - the Sun Insurance Office in London is a direct transition from domestic architecture. Initially, the office takes inspiration from the home since it is a new and yet unknown typology. People could hardly distinguish the first office interiors from their home living rooms, “[...] there is little functional differentiation at this period between the home and office; a fireplace for heating, the bureau for storage - only the seating arrangement hints at office use.” (Duffy, 262)

With the development of the office typology, the aim to provide home like comfort started to disappear and transform itself into interiors which maximize employee productivity and allow managerial control. People in the offices were part an efficient mechanism as in the

Larkin Administration Building, working on a “seat hinged to the clerical desk restricting freedom of movement”, thus the focus was only work without any distractions. (Duffy, 268) The domestic character of an office and user appropriation was neglected with the idea to impose obvious control. Larkin Building is also among the first obvious examples where we can see and learn about the hierarchical differences and therefore office space differentiations of the users within the building. The office atmosphere for the clerk drastically diverged from the one of the manager with his own closed door office, offering spectacular view which “is a status symbol”. (Dovey, 182)

This status differences avoidance and hierarchical approach gave birth to the new office typology *bürolandschaft* or also know as the office landscape. When using the word landscape with office, one could imagine a very domestic environment for the workers with abundance of plants, turning into a very comfortable set for work. However, the reality of the open floor office plans shows a landscape of desks which are separated with barriers of few plants. In this case the role of plants acts as a soft dividers between the employees within the space. (Spain, 125) The *bürolandschaft* did not manage to create a space without status hierarchies and a more comfortable and adoptable space for employees to exchange knowledge. It was even more harsh and dangerous method of managerial control because the employees did not know they were observed through this new open typology. This typology once again with its arrangement allowed people with higher status to position themselves on the more privileged desk spaces closer to the windows. (Duffy, 276)

More domestic environments and user appropriated open offices showed great productivity of the employees due to the comfortable home like environment. Furthermore, being surrounded by people who work and limiting the movement within the work space - boosted the work efficiency even more. However, the *bürolandschaft* was majorly disliked and opposed by the managers because in this open floor plan they could be more observed compared to when they are behind closed door. (Duffy, 278)

The bank typology which is closely studied and documented by Nikolaus Pevsner in his text *Exchanges and Banks* shows a quite dynamic evolution, similarly to the one of the office. In the mid 19th century, Pevsner describes, the banks as “exactly like private houses, with the business rooms on the ground floor left and right of the entrance and the manager’s living quarters above”. (Pevsner, 200). The bank typology did not preserve a certain type over time it could take place in a square and constitute an urban type, but at the same time it could remain a domestic architectural type or occupy a palazzo. However, the importance of the image of the bank and needed trust from the public developed the architectural type into more massive, fortress like structure, thus the client could feel safe about their treasures inside. Because of the solidity of the structure and the rich materials used, people trust the institution. (Men and Money: A Question of Confidence) Over time the bank typology became more closed one, creating its own universe within as the examples in the Pevsner’s text show, more like a fortress, only lighted from the top. (Pevsner, 202) Perhaps because the program of the bank has always been an obscure one and in order for it to remain like this it has to be behind closed doors, away from the public.

However, what remained over time even though the typology of the bank continued to evolve is the courtyard. While the more private matters were situated behind closed doors in the fortress like bank structure, the public matters like trade were happening in the open part

of the bank. (Pevsner, 199) The courtyard was used in a similar way as in the office buildings - as medium of control. In the office - the interior courtyard worked as reversed prison where the managers were observing the work of the employees all the time. Clerks were surrounded and enclosed by four walls physically but they were also bounded at their positions by the visual boundaries of their executives. (Duffy, 269) While doing research and analysis on the meaning of social plinth, I studied in more detail the Bank of England by Soane and the new proposal for the reconstruction by Herbert Baker. I came to the conclusion that the bank was transformed from a network of rooms and courtyards to a bank with a central courtyard which does not have any connection to the outside street but only visual connection to the head offices positioned above. This type continues to resonate today in the current building of the bank.

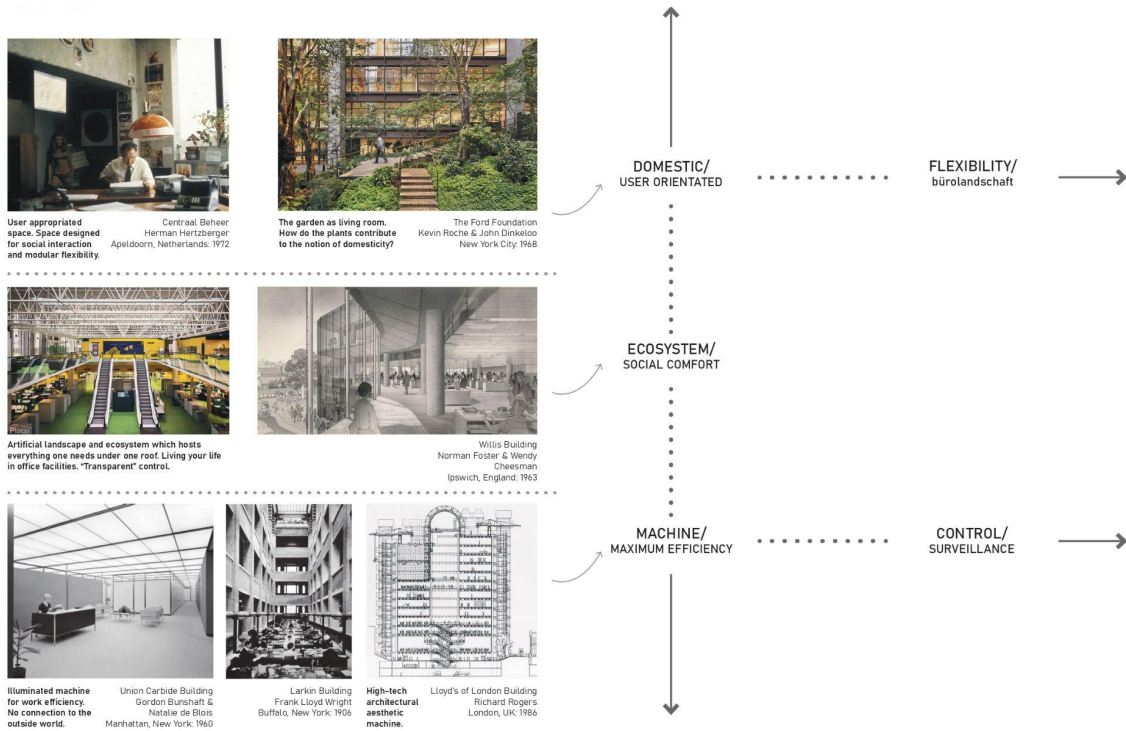
The bank continues to remain a very closed and private institution, which functions and serve more to the corporate rather than the needs of the individuals. However, the question remains - how can the bank respond and adapt itself to the needs of the society and open itself, thus the public could be more involved and aware in the decisions which are undertaken by the central bank. This leads us to the alternatives which the future of the central bank holds taking into consideration the digital age and predominance of the virtual money. As in the podcast by Greek's former finance minister suggested an alternative of ideal capitalism where the individual is included into the decision making process of the company. The goal of this method is to remove the hierarchies within the corporate but at the same time avoid monopoly. (Varoufakis, Yanis) However, in my opinion this alternative method may turn out to be a bit anarchical and perhaps designed for an ideal society which is not influenced by external factors when making a decision.

There is somehow an intermediate solution where the central bank does not communicate their ideas and actions through the corporate banks but communicate directly to the individual worker. Since the corporate banks are often taking actions for their own good neglecting the need of the society, therefore the bond between the citizen and the central bank has to be created. As a result, the central bank has to constitute a more public space where people could be part of the process and could learn more about the activities of the bank. These conclusions were also a result of the social plinth experiment we performed where the plinth became a communicator and mediator between the city and the bank as well as the institution and the citizens. It became a democratic and social platform where the citizens and the public became part of the bank. Therefore, the bank is seen as a catalyst for ordinary space where the city exists on the ground floor and the institution continues to exist up but they come together in the plinth, in a social infrastructure.

### **3. Reflective problematization**

There has been a great transformation of the office interior from the domestic through the ecosystem office to the hierarchical, machine like and controlled office. The precedent studies showed how this evolution of the office typology took place and evolved with time. For instance the Sun Insurance Office has very domestic character as well as the Centraal Beheer which allows user appropriation of the space which would suit employee's taste of comfort. Hertzberger designs a social space through the interior of the Centraal Beheer where

employees could have a constant exchange of knowledge. While these office interiors are very much answering the needs of the users, the ones which evolved like the Larking Building or Lloyd's of London Building answer the needs of the executives and the corporate. Employees are offered less comfortable place in order to increase the efficiency and are under constant visual control. This third and essential office interior which the precedent study showed in the evolution of the office space are the so called ecosystems which offer everything that the user needs in order to keep them inside the building for the longer time and once again increase the productivity.



Perhaps if the bank has to work more with the individuals and their needs, improve the communication and remove the monopoly, there has to be a reorganisation of the central bank's system and once again appropriating the space according to the user's needs rather than the corporate. User appropriation, freedom and exchange of knowledge are among the qualities which one architectural space should host in order to serve to the society.

This leads me to the questions which have to be further researched and studied in order to understand how they would constitute an architectural space. As mentioned in the academic positioning part, plants could be part of a domestic environment but they could be used as barrier and divider instead in a more open floor plan interiors. How is then the element of domesticity expressed in these emerging office typologies? What are the elements and how do they differ from each other? How this could be applied in the future office with the current pandemic situation and the home office? How can the bank create a better link with the citizen both as part of a public space and as a communicator with the institution? How can the bank become an agent of change? How can we design a social infrastructure in such a private institution?

#### 4. Methodology

To be able to answer those questions and problems arising from the research done until now, there are several research methods that would be explored in order to obtain various perspectives and therefore better solutions.

**Precedent studies:** From the first eight weeks of the research seminar I have been able to learn a lot about the office and the bank as typologies, as architectural spaces and as interiors and institutions. I will continue with the research through precedents, studying the buildings thought plans, sections and elevations as well as through their forms and interior spaces. Since the topic of domesticity is highly addressed in my research plan it will be essential to study plans of early offices which evolved from the house type. But also how both the office and dwelling typology has changed over time and how this affected the employees.

**Literature research:** I will be using literature in order to get information on various topics as well as inform myself with background information concerning topics which I am not well aware of such as banking, economics, role of central banks. Moreover, academic articles as will be part of the research of the alternative functions of the future banks in order to be able to establish this link between the bank and the citizen.

**Thinking through modeling, drawing and making:** The method of thinking through making is very well used in the studio Buildings Interiors Cities since week one. While making models both for the office interiors and learning about the social plinth and the public interaction with it, I have learnt a lot about these spaces. This is why, I am planning to use this method of research and thinking for answering some of my questions concerning the future bank.

**Site Analysis:** When visiting the site of the bank in Brussels, methods like mapping, photographing, sketching, drawing would be useful for documenting the condition of the site and the existing issues which would need to be solved.

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