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Editors
Ana Esteban-Maluenda
Nicolas Marine
Laura Sánchez Carrasco
Alberto Ruiz Colmenar

Graphic Design and Layout
Irene Egea Ruiz
Mónica Verdejo Ruiz

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Building Supranational Power: The European Central Bank

Sebastiano Fabbrini

Department of Architecture

Università Iuav di Venezia, Italy

sfabbrini@iuav.it

Abstract

Twenty years after the launch of the competition for the headquarters of the European Central Bank, this paper sets out to retrace and discuss the complex process that led to housing such unique form of supranational power in Frankfurt am Main. Although both the bankers and the architects framed this effort in functional terms, understating or simply misjudging its political significance, the competition opened the door for a series of difficult questions concerning the representation of European power and its effects on the city. While approaching this type of building as a symbol or embodiment of political forces had become taboo, issues of meaning and image reentered through the back door, as architects struggled to navigate their role within the European project.

Keywords

Architecture, Power, European Integration, European Central Bank, Frankfurt am Main.

From Maastricht to Frankfurt

In November 2002, the European Central Bank (ECB) launched a major competition for the “planning and design” of its new premises in Frankfurt am Main.¹ Although the process of European integration had started some fifty years earlier and multiple institutions had been built during that time, the ECB project came in a period of profound transformations and opened the door for a reframing of the relation between architecture and supranational power. The watershed moment was the signing of the Maastricht treaty in 1992, which inaugurated “a new stage” in the integration process, merging the previous European communities into the European Union and laying the groundwork for the introduction of a common currency.² One of the reforms coming out of Maastricht concerned the rules of engagement with architecture and the city. Up to that point, no definitive decision had been taken regarding the location of the European institutions, which therefore did not have the power to design, build and own their premises.³

Right after Maastricht, the Heads of State and Government of the European Union decided that the ECB was to have its permanent seat in Frankfurt, the financial centre of the continent. This allowed the new institution to actively address, from the onset, the question of its physical presence in the city. Although it initially rented an existing high-rise in the financial district (what came to be known as the Eurotower), the plan was to build a new home, specifically designed for its purposes.

Following a “feasibility study” that considered and evaluated thirty-five local sites, the ECB eventually purchased the site of the Grossmarkthalle, the old market hall in the Ostend district, from the city of Frankfurt.⁴ The acquisition was preceded by the so-called “headquarters agreement” between the ECB and the German federal government, which underlined the “independence” of the institution and the “inviolability” of its premises.⁵ As the first euro banknotes and coins had just started circulating at the beginning of 2002, everything was ready for an architectural competition.

In addition to having the power to drive this architectural project—a power that the Commission and the other European institutions did not have at the time of their initial placement—the ECB is particularly relevant because it oversees the area in which the process of supranationalization has gone furthest: the area of monetary integration. As noted by Heisenberg and Richmond, the creation of the euro represents the most significant “deepening” of the European community since its inception.⁶ Howarth and Loedel went as far as to argue that “the ECB has become the most important institutional creation in Europe since the institutionalization of the nation state in the 17th century: it is the ECB that perhaps best defines the relinquishing of state sovereignty to an institution with powerful supranational mechanisms of decision-making and enforcement”.⁷

The importance of monetary policy made it so that the power and influence of the ECB quickly extended from maintaining price stability in the Eurozone to supporting its general economic policies to becoming a key actor in its political governance. During the debt crisis of 2008-09, precisely as construction of its new headquarters in Frankfurt got under

way, one could argue that the ECB became the *de facto* government of the EU.⁸ Designing its headquarters during those turbulent times was therefore a unique opportunity to help shape the institution that, more than any other, had come to exert power in the complex space of the supranational.

Hyperbolic Form

As the competition started to unfold, both the institution and the architects found themselves navigating in uncharted waters. OMA noted that “conceiving a building for the European Central Bank is like flying blind, venturing into a domain with no clear references”.⁹ Jakob & MacFarlane, one of the other seventy participating firms, framed the challenge in these terms: “how could the Central Bank of Europe be represented architecturally?”¹⁰ The competition brief, however, steered away from this type of reflections. Other than generically acknowledging that the design proposals would constitute “inspiring contributions to the building of a unified Europe”, the organizers of the competition did not highlight any of the political dynamics behind this endeavor.¹¹

According to the brief, one of the most important objectives was the integration and preservation of the Grossmarkthalle. This effort went as far as to remove, clean and reposition the bricks of the historic building. The other major requirement centered on “sustainability and energy efficiency”.¹² Coop Himmelb(l)au’s winning project focused heavily on this issue, proposing a new type of envelope, called “shield hybrid façade” which, through a variety of advanced technologies, promised a high degree of climate-control in the office space.¹³

In addition to underlining this technological apparatus, Coop Himmelb(l)au argued that the project revolved around a key formal gesture: “The design concept of the ECB is to vertically divide a monolithic block through a hyperboloid cut, wedge it apart, twist it and fill the newly created intermediary space with a glass atrium”.¹⁴ The result was a “twisted double tower” that, from the architect’s perspective, responded to the ECB’s “request to create a unique, iconic building as a symbol for the European Union”. Ironically, six years later, a very similar concept was submitted to the competition for the new headquarters of the Central Bank of Azerbaijan, which Coop Himmelb(l)au also won.

Apolitical Materialism

In 2008, as the financial crisis was exploding and the ECB project was getting off the ground, Alejandro Zaera-Polo published *The Politics of the Envelope*, which gave voice to a changing understanding of the relationship between architecture and politics: “Architects’ traditional role as visionaries (and ideologists) has become redundant as the sheer speed of change overtakes their capacity to represent politics ideologically; within this context it is vital to produce an updated politics of architecture, in which the discipline is not merely reduced to a representation of ideal political concepts, but conceived as an effective tool to produce change”.¹⁵ His proposal was to “mobilize the political in the vertical envelope as an expression of technical efficiencies”, which was very much the approach

of the ECB project.¹⁶ Architecture's engagement with politics was being moved towards the technical sphere of the envelope, which in turn was invested with the ability to produce iconographic performance, expression and even affect.

On the other hand, what was presented as a new form of political materialism tended to align with the architectural outlook of most large organizations across the globe, as the go-to model for the generic, corporate high-rise at the turn of the millennium. In Frankfurt, the silhouette of the financial district, a couple of kilometers westward along the Main river, constitutes an inescapable term of comparison for the ECB headquarters. Foster's Commerzbank project and the renovation of Deutsche Bank unfolded in this very period. Kees Christiaanse, one of the renowned architects leading the jury of the ECB competition, told me that "there was no wish to look like anything in the financial district".¹⁷ The result of the competition, however, was a building that, to quote architectural historian Hauke Horn, aligned with the "international iconography of financial high-rises" and did not show much of its "political purpose".¹⁸

Brutal Understatements

Although the material architecture of the ECB drew close to that of commercial banks, its institutional architecture had a very different model, which was also based in Frankfurt: the Deutsche Bundesbank.¹⁹ In light of what had happened in the first half of the century, this was the first central bank to be given full independence from government. Since the early 1970s, the Bundesbank has been housed in a brutalist structure in the Nordend district, which set out to "radiate a strong sense of objectivity and functionality".²⁰ According to Wolfgang Voigt, after the experience of the Nazi regime and its Reichsbank, "any notion of the architecture being used as a statement of power was avoided at all costs".²¹

Similarly, in the design of the ECB, the goal was not to stand out, but to blend in. Like post-war German institutions, European institutions are very careful not to project their power, because they fear that, given the complex and fragile nature of a supranational democracy, this power may be perceived as illegitimate. According to Christiansee, the jury that selected Coop Himmelb(l)au's proposal saw the ECB as a "service institution" and, therefore, was not looking for "great monumentality" or "extreme formal expression".²² For example, the jury commended the design concept by Johann Eisele, who was awarded the third prize in the competition, noting that "it refrained from creating a unique and distinctive landmark for the ECB" but was "efficient, technically and economically feasible and commendable".²³

For Francis Gross, one of the ECB executives who oversaw this endeavor from the inside and served as the secretary of the jury, the emphasis on the functional and technical aspects of the building, rather than its unique status as a supranational institution, spoke to the culture of the ECB: "we can actually see that an institution's approach to architecture reflects its approach to its mission, which can raise some concern".²⁴

Image and Identity

In spite of the constant attempt to stress the functional over the symbolic, another important question kept presenting itself throughout the competition: the question of the bank's image. Of the seventy-one proposals, twenty-four were rejected for this reason: "the jury found that the outline concept would not reflect the values for which the ECB stands and would not convey the appropriate image".²⁵ The ECB provided a list of values, which included transparency, communication, efficiency and stability. As for the question of its image, however, there was never any explanation as to why an image was deemed appropriate or inappropriate.

A similar issue had been addressed a couple of years earlier, when the ECB had to define the iconography of the new common currency. In that instance, after a painstaking process, the issue was solved by elaborating a set of architectural images designed to appear as "neutral" as possible, in order to be accepted by all member states.²⁶ While being realistic and somehow recognizable as Europeans, the images featured on the euro notes did not represent any existing building.

Interestingly, ten years after the introduction of the euro, as the ECB tower was under way, Dutch artist Robin Stam carried out an experimental project in the town of Spijkenisse, near Rotterdam, where he was able to build the "fictional" bridges depicted on the banknotes.²⁷ This form of iconographic transfer from the bidimensional realm of the banknote to the tridimensional realm of the building manifested itself on multiple occasions in the case of ECB as well. For example, even before construction started, motives taken from banknotes were projected onto the façade of the Grossmarkhalle. Historically, this dynamic used to go the opposite way: banknotes tended to depict images of important public buildings, representing the authority in charge of that currency. In the case of the euro, on the contrary, the banknote came before the building. One of the clearest examples of such dynamic can be observed in the bank's council room, the inner sanctum of Coop Himmelb(l)au's building. As noted in an ECB brochure, "the ceiling of the council room is unique: the architects call it the Europe ceiling — the aluminum elements depict a map of Europe, as shown on the euro banknotes, in an abstract way".²⁸

In the absence of a clear political project, the euro was invested with the monumental task of generating a common identity, including the difficult effort of elaborating a set of images that could fill the EU's iconographic vacuum and fuel future building projects. At the ceremony for the laying of the foundation stone of the ECB building, in the Spring of 2010, the president of the bank, Jean-Claude Trichet, along with the architect and the mayor of Frankfurt, solemnly placed a set of euro banknotes in the stone. While it was not unusual to put money in foundation stones, this case was particularly significant. The "house of the euro", as it was often called, was conceptually as well as physically built on a banknote.²⁹

Rituals and Riots

Even though the ECB project, much like the EU itself, was framed in functional, economic terms, certain political dynamics were still able to

infiltrate the site, sometimes in unexpected ways, especially as the institution took on an increasingly central political role during the financial crisis. After the laying of the foundation stone, an even more theatrical ritual marked the topping-out of the building's structure, two years later. In line with a tradition that spans across most of northern Europe, the builders raised a topping-out wreath and placed it atop the tower. The governors of the national central bank, one by one, hung the flag of their country onto the wreath, which had already been adorned by a multitude of ribbons carrying the EU flag. While the foundation stone was meant to be buried forever, this was a temporary, highly visible display. Made of pine branches and clad in flags, the wreath was shaped like a building—a little pavilion that embodied the process of supranationalization behind the ECB. Even if only for a few hours, a purely symbolic, temporary pavilion designed to express the uniqueness of this institution, as well as the political dynamics behind it, was placed on top of the actual structure.

When the project was finally completed, in March 2015, another ceremony was performed in the new building, as all the local and European authorities came together to celebrate the inauguration. Meanwhile, outside of the building, a different set of political forces had started to mobilize and, as the ribbon was being cut, a major riot exploded in the neighborhood. Activists from all over Europe had assembled in front of this new architectural landmark to protest the austerity measures carried out by the ECB during and after the financial crisis. They did not see the ECB as a neutral service-institution, making technical decisions: they saw it as a political actor. Although the goal of the institution was to understate its political dimension, the new building was immediately turned into a site of political engagement by EU citizens. Since then, it has been attracting countless rallies and demonstrations.

Overstating Architecture

In her recent book *Five Ways to Make Architecture Political*, Albená Yaneva argues that buildings should no longer be seen as “political symbols or embodiments of big political forces”.³⁰ Similarly to Zaera-Polo, she separates architecture from traditional, overshadowing theories of power—related to ideology, state, nation, government or activism—and makes the case that the political can be generated and explored at the “myopic, microscopic level of the practice”. The inner-workings of architecture in practice are therefore attributed a great deal of political agency. The ECB competition is one of those cases that call for a significant scaling down of most assumptions regarding both what architects are allowed to do, and what architects are capable of doing.

The development of the Holocaust memorial is a good example of the degree to which the ECB endeavored to keep architects away from the space of the political. In order to commemorate the darkest chapter in the history of the Grossmarkthalle, when its basement was used as a gathering place for the deportation of Jewish families, the ECB decided to include a memorial in its new premises. The design of the most symbolic space in the new headquarters, however, was divorced from the architectural competition. A separate competition was organized only for the memorial, in

collaboration with the City of Frankfurt and the local Jewish community.³¹ The two processes, the building and the memorial, ran in parallel and were both completed in 2015, but did not interact with each other. This was the clearest possible opportunity to reflect on the history of European integration and remind everybody how and why institutions like the ECB had been established. None of the 2002 competition proposals could seize this opportunity, as this loaded topic had been taken off the architect's table.

On the other hand, this case also highlights a set of limitations that do not depend on external forces. The outcome of the ECB competition was not only determined by the institution's unwillingness to expose itself and make a political statement through architecture, but also by the difficulty, on the part of many architects, to fully grasp the political stakes of this endeavor. Of the seventy-one architectural practices that took part in the competition, how many actually knew how European integration worked or how a supranational institution differed from other institutions?

Examining the short “concept outlines” that each participant had to submit, the reader will find that only one proposal alluded to the uniqueness of EU power and used the term “supranational”.³² The second closest attempt was a proposal that described the ECB as a “supraregional” institution. Other proposals reveal a misunderstanding of the logic behind the institution. For example, Miralles and Tagliabue addressed the site of the ECB as “the base/landscape for the different/individual pavilions/countries”. Rather than a place where national powers could merge into a supranational entity, the ECB was treated as an international fair, where each country had its own pavilion, *à la* Biennale. But the most common move was to sprinkle some symbolism in the landscaping *around* the new building: the list of practices that proposed to create some form of garden, with trees or flowers representing all EU member states includes SOM, NHT, BRT, KHR, United Architects / UN Studio.

Even though the ECB competition did not give much leeway to experiment and push (beyond) the envelope, twenty years later, this case provides valuable insights for a conversation about architecture's engagement with the European project.³³ Perhaps there may be a middle ground between utopian visions, representational performativity and a form of engagement centered on hyperbolic, super-efficient envelopes. Going forward in this effort to think about the relation between architecture and power, in its increasingly complex forms, it may be useful to keep in mind Hannah Arendt's warning that “utility established as meaning generates meaninglessness”.³⁴

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