



Efficient, Neutral, Hyperbolic: Building the European Central Bank

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The building of the European Central Bank (ECB) in Frankfurt am Main is the result of a complex process that intersects and amplifies a set of issues concerning the relationship between architecture and power at the turn of the millennium. From the initial competition, launched in 2002, to the inauguration of the tower designed by Coop Himmelb(l)au, this case highlights the reluctance, on the part of the institution, to use architecture to project power and showcase its mission. This hesitancy relates to the ECB's particular status as a supranational institution, operating between multiple national identities. While assuming an increasingly political role, the bank tried to present itself as a neutral, technical body, responding to a model of depoliticized governance. All that matters is what the institution does, not what it is. On a parallel level, this functionalist outlook aligned with a contemporaneous shift in architectural practice and thought. The traditional concern with representation was challenged by an evolving notion of materialism, which set aside questions of meaning in favor of questions of performance. All that matters is what buildings do. From this perspective, the performance of the technical infrastructure was believed to be the primary source of meaning, for both the institution and the architecture that housed it. The unfolding of the ECB project, however, revealed the limitations of such approaches. Given the importance of the bank within the governance of the European Union during a time of economic crisis, the building site became the stage for multiple symbolic rituals and forced a difficult reflection on the image of the European community. Despite the efforts to blend in and neutralize architecture, as in the case of the euro banknotes, the building process pushed the ECB to address its unique political dimension, beyond reductive notions of technical efficiency.

Keywords: European integration; supranationalization; depoliticization; institution building; Frankfurt am Main; Coop Himmelb(l)au



From Maastricht to Frankfurt

Utility established as meaning generates meaninglessness.

Hannah Arendt, 1958

In November 2002, the European Central Bank (ECB) launched a major competition for the 'planning and design' of its new premises in Frankfurt (ECB 2002: 2). 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 transformation and opened the door for a reframing of the relationship 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 (EU) and laying the groundwork for the introduction of a common currency (Dinan 2006). 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 (Hein 2004).

The European Commission, the first institutional experiment in supranational governance, is a prime example (Sterken 2015). It was set up in Brussels in the late 1950s simply because Belgium preceded the other member states in alphabetical order. The initial plan was to rotate its seat between all the national capitals — a complex logistical challenge that was immediately dismissed. In the end, the Commission never left Brussels. But, at the same time, Brussels would not be officially recognized as the permanent seat of the Commission until the 1990s, more than thirty years later. The responsibility to construct a home for this institution fell on national and local actors, as the Commission did not have the legal authority to produce its own architecture (Fabbrini 2021a).

The development of the Berlaymont, the office building that serves as the headquarters of the Commission, was carried out by the Belgian government, in collaboration with local real-estate developers. As it was unclear whether the Commission would remain in Brussels, the Berlaymont was initially designed to house a Belgian ministry: the local authorities did not want to make a large investment for a European institution that might leave after a few months. The result was a building that never fit the *modus operandi* of the Commission, as evidenced by the many attempts to adapt and transform a space that was not conducive to a supranational operation.

The case of the European Parliament is even more intricate (Lamant 2018). Its Brussels headquarters were famously developed in secret because the French government opposed moving the institution away from its initial seat, in Strasbourg. For the entire development process, the massive complex that came to house the Parliament in the *quartier européen* was camouflaged as an ‘international congress center’.

Whatever It Takes

After Maastricht, the project of monetary integration was placed in the hands of a new institution, which was initially called the European Monetary Institute (EMI) and, in 1998, morphed into the ECB. Well before the bank started operating, the heads of state and government of all EU countries had already decided that its permanent seat would be in Frankfurt, the financial center of the continent. This allowed the new institution to actively address, from the onset, the question of its physical presence in the city. Although the EMI initially rented an existing high-rise (which came to be known as the Eurotower) in the financial district, the plan was to build a new home, specifically designed for its purposes.

Following a ‘feasibility study’ that considered and evaluated 35 local sites, the ECB eventually purchased the site of the Grossmarkthalle, the old market hall in the Ostend district, from the City of Frankfurt (ECB 2020). 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 (ECB 1998). While the first euro banknotes and coins were beginning to circulate in early 2002, the bank had already laid the groundwork for a design competition for the new site.

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 placement — the ECB is particularly relevant because it oversees monetary integration, the area in which the process of supranationalization has gone the furthest. The introduction of the euro represents the most significant ‘deepening’ of the European community since its inception (Alesina and Giavazzi 2020). Howarth and Loedel argue that ‘the ECB has become the most important institutional creation in Europe since the institutionalization of the nation state in the seventeenth 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’ (2005: xi).

If the degree of supranationalization can be measured by the level of autonomy from, and power over, national bodies, the ECB is arguably the most advanced

European institution in this respect. As noted by Heisenberg and Richmond, the ECB is not subject to oversight by national governments, unlike the European Commission, which can be overruled by the Council of Ministers; and it has greater legal authority than the European Parliament, which cannot make legally binding regulations and decisions (2002). The ECB also differs from the European Court of Justice, which has a collaborative relationship with the national courts. The national central banks have in turn become agents of the ECB. They receive directions from Frankfurt, not interpretations that they apply themselves. Naturally, they also had to give up their gold reserves, which are now owned by the ECB. Furthermore, such authority is not limited to the public sector: with the introduction of the Single Supervisory Mechanism, the ECB has also become the ‘direct supervisor’ of all the large private banks in the eurozone, which amount to more than 80% of the total banking assets in the EU (Wiggins, Wedow, and Metrick 2019).

Monetary policy was so important that the power and influence of the ECB quickly extended from maintaining price stability in the eurozone, which is the stated task of the institution, to becoming a key actor in its political governance. During the debt crisis of 2008–2009, just when construction of its new headquarters in Frankfurt began, the ECB became, one could argue, the helmsman of the European ship (Athanasios 2018). During one of the most challenging economic storms in the history of the EU, the president of the ECB said that he was ready to do whatever it took to keep the ship afloat — a declaration of supranational power that no other European institution was ever able to make. Designing the ECB 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. It was also the first supranational institution that could truly explore its architectural dimension.

Hyperbolic Form

In September 1994, as the European Monetary Institute had just begun its operations in the Eurotower, the Deutsches Architekturmuseum held an exhibition called *The Bank: Three Architectural Concepts for the Future*. Three renowned firms — David Chipperfield, Eduardo Souto de Moura, and Herzog & de Meuron — were invited to reflect on this typology and imagine ‘a fictive project, with a fictive client, a fictive programme and without a fixed location’. The question was, ‘how will the Bank of the Future look?’. Surprisingly, no one mentioned that a new type of bank had just come to Frankfurt. Instead, the focus was on a hypothetical, generic bank branch that could exist in any European city. The ethos of the exhibition was clearly expressed by Herzog & de Meuron, who made the case that the bank of the future ‘will look the way the bank has always looked like and give us the same impression the bank has always given us:

a stable, firmly rooted, unmistakable structure, which is immediately recognisable as *The Bank* in any urban context, despite the plethora of symbols, signs and billboards' (Chipperfield et al. 1994, cited by Herzog & de Meuron 1994 (website)). Their model consisted of a large, hermetic, cubic volume, oddly reminiscent of Scrooge McDuck's money bin.

In just a few years, the ECB competition created several layers of complexity in this conversation. Now the problem was more specific and layered (Fig. 1). Jakob + MacFarlane, one of the 71 firms that participated in the competition, framed the question in these terms: 'how could the Central Bank of Europe be represented architecturally?' (ECB 2003a: 63). Both the institution and the architects were navigating uncharted waters. The need for a change in approach was underlined most directly by OMA, one of several high-profile participants in the competition: 'Conceiving a building for



Figure 1: Cover of the ECB competition brief, November 2002. © European Central Bank.

the European Central Bank is like flying blind, venturing into a domain with no clear references. So far, the question of a European style or iconography to accommodate Europe's increasing integration has the usual habitat of business: a high-rise tower clad in beige marble with brown mirror glass windows. Besides the building's name *Eurotower*, no effort has been made to present the bank as one of the symbols of a unified Europe' (ECB 2003a: 33).

From the launch of the competition in 2002 to the inauguration of the building in 2015, however, the opportunities and challenges presented by this unique case were constantly understated. The competition brief set the tone immediately. 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 (ECB 2002: 3).

According to the brief, one of the most important objectives was the integration and preservation of the Grossmarkthalle. This effort went so far as to remove, clean and reposition the bricks of the existing building. The other major requirement centered on sustainability and energy efficiency (ECB 2002). 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 (ECB 2020).

In addition to highlighting this technological apparatus, Coop Himmelb(l)au argued that the project revolved around a decisive formal gesture (Fig. 2): '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' (Coop Himmelb(l)au n.d.). 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 similar concept was submitted to the competition for the new headquarters of the Central Bank of Azerbaijan, which Coop Himmelb(l)au also won.

It was a design concept that aligned with the trend of the time, including presenting the cutting sequence through photos of little blue foam models. But the way this concept engaged with the specificity of the institution was unexplained. Even if one attempts to read the 'hyperboloid cut' in a metaphorical way, which is not the way it was supposed to be read, it is difficult to find a connection with the ECB. The formal operation of dividing a monolith into two towers obviously clashes with the logic of European integration, which implies bringing together and uniting separate entities.

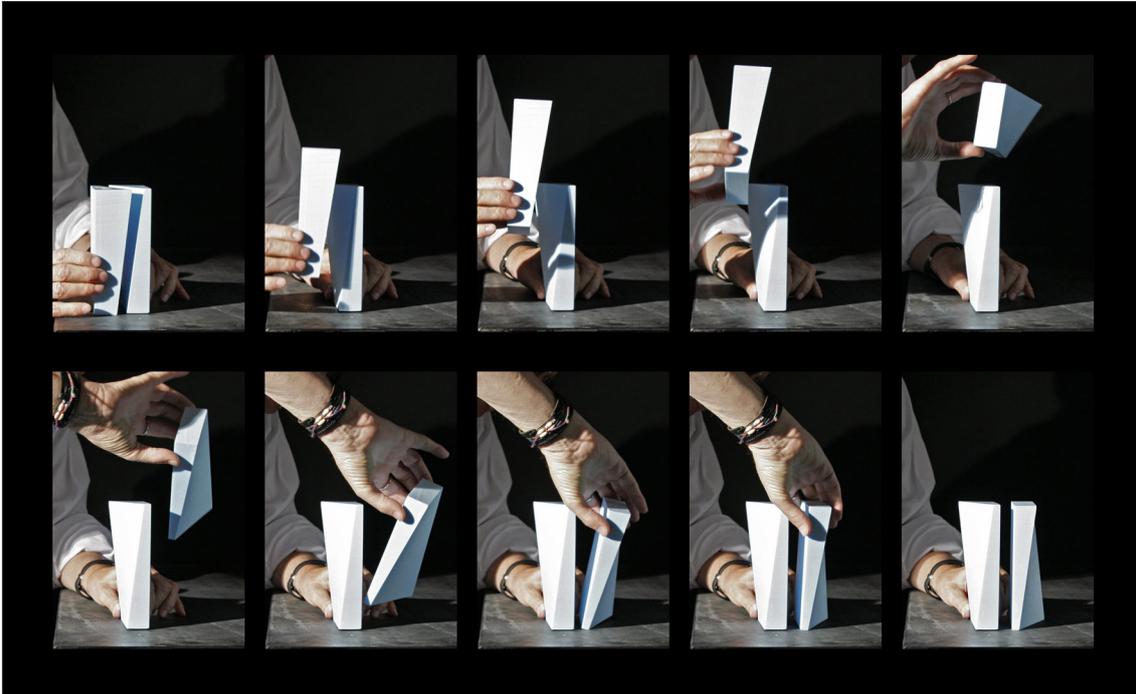


Figure 2: Coop Himmelb(l)au illustrates the 'hyperboloid cut' of the ECB project, mid-2000s. © Coop Himmelb(l)au.

Updating the Politics of Architecture

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' (2008: 194). The angle was to 'mobilize the political in the vertical envelope as an expression of technical efficiencies', the same approach used for the ECB project (Zaera-Polo 2009: 127; Friedrich 2015). Architecture's engagement with politics was being moved toward the technical sphere of the envelope, which in turn was endowed with the ability to produce iconographic performance, expression, and even affect.

However, what was presented as a new form of political materialism also tended to align with the architectural outlook of most large organizations globally, 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. Kees Christiaanse, one of the distinguished architects in the jury of the ECB competition, told me that ‘there was no wish to look like anything in the financial district’ (2021). From his perspective, ‘firstly, the buildings there are, apart from Commerzbank, not attractive; secondly, the ECB is a public institution, not a commercial institution; and thirdly, the ECB is supposed to guard everyone’s financial safety’. 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’ (2021).

The Commerzbank tower, which opened one year before the establishment of the ECB, was a particularly prominent point of reference (Krause 2016). From the full-height central atrium to the proposed ‘hanging gardens’, many of Coop Himmelb(l)au’s choices seemed to reference Norman Foster’s design for Commerzbank. Another important reference was the Deutsche Bank headquarters, which went through a transformative renovation process when the ECB was beginning construction. From a massing perspective, it was a similar example of a double-tower scheme, connected by a central atrium.

But the primary thread linking all these turn-of-the-millennium projects was the emphasis on the performance of the envelope. In 2008, the ECB stated that its new premises should be 30% more energy-efficient than stipulated by the *Energieeinsparverordnung* (German energy saving directive). In 2009, Commerzbank received the Green Building Award. In 2011, Deutsche Bank was the first high-rise refurbishment project to receive the highest possible certifications — LEED Platinum and DGNB Gold — for their resource and energy efficiency. For Reinhard Frost, a historian working at the Deutsche Bank archives, this endeavor was ‘the hallmark of a new era and a highly visible expression of the financial and ecological identity of a global institution which has always been aware of its social responsibility’ (2016: 50). In the middle of the debt crisis, as the misconduct of institutions like Deutsche Bank was being exposed to the world, financial and ecological concerns were swiftly juxtaposed, in the hope that a super-efficient envelope might help in the process of identity-(re)building (Caesar 2016).

Brutal Understatements

Although the material architecture of the ECB drew close to that of commercial banks, its institutional architecture had a different model, which was also based in Frankfurt:

the Deutsche Bundesbank. Around the time of the Maastricht Treaty, when the project of monetary integration was laid out, the new European institution was explicitly modeled after Germany's central bank. As noted by Philipp Maier, the Bundesbank 'acted as the blueprint for the ECB' (2002: ii).

In addition to the fact that Germany had by far the strongest economy in the union, the Bundesbank represented a fitting model because of the way it had been structured after World War II. Following the collapse of the Nazi regime and its Reichsbank, the Americans redesigned central banking in Germany, creating a system akin to the Federal Reserve System of the United States. The first phase consisted of decentralization, through the establishment of regional central banks, coordinated by the Bank Deutscher Länder (Bank of the German States). Only in 1957, when the situation had stabilized, was this network replaced by a more centralized structure, with the establishment of the Bundesbank. Considering what had happened in the first half of the century, the new institution was the first central bank to be given full independence from government — one of the key principles that was later adopted by the ECB.

A new, independent central bank required a new headquarters, which was eventually built between 1967 and 1972 in Frankfurt's Nordend (Durth and Thies 2020). The project, designed by Otto Apel, Hannsgeorg Beckert and Gilbert Becker, was centered around a 200-meter-long, horizontal, concrete slab, which was described by one of the bank's board members as a 'brutalist building' that 'radiates a strong sense of objectivity and functionality' (Deutsche Bundesbank 2016). At a recent symposium called 'Unloved Modernism', Wolfgang Voigt, former deputy director of the Deutsches Architekturmuseum, argued that, after the experience of the Reichsbank, 'any notion of the architecture being used as a statement of power was avoided at all costs' (2015).

As two institutions that claimed independence from government and originated from a difficult process of unification of state (or *Land*) banks, both the Bundesbank and the ECB needed to avoid any overt statement of power. Naturally, the architectural outcome looked different. While the Bundesbank slab spoke the brutalist language of its time, the ECB tower was able to blend in with the corporate skyline of 21st-century 'Mainhattan' (Sturm and Schmal 2014).

The analogy between the ECB design and the architecture of commercial banks and corporations fits into the narrative of those who see European integration solely as an economic project, a neoliberal endeavor driven by transnational capitalism — a reflection of what Zygmunt Bauman has described as the contemporary rift between power and politics. The situation, of course, is more complicated than that. European integration is a complex, non-linear process, where most of the progress happens through gradual spillovers, behind the scenes. Unlike most state institutions, the

European institutions are careful to not project their power, because they fear that, given the complex and fragile nature of a supranational democracy, this power may be perceived as illegitimate. In the exercise of power, the goal is not to stand out but to blend in. Again, this is a feature that, for different reasons, European institutions share with post-WWII German institutions.

A good example pertaining to the ECB is the remarkable case of the design of the euro banknotes. Right before the launch of the competition for its headquarters, the ECB went through a painstaking process to define the iconography of the euro — a set of architectural images designed to appear as ‘neutral’ as possible, in order to be accepted by all member states (Fabbrini 2021b). This case clearly speaks to the hesitancy to present any clear architectural statement that may be perceived as overbearing or politically incorrect and that may generate a nationalist backlash.

According to Kees Christiaanse, 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’ (2021). 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’ (ECB 2004: 20).

Francis Gross, one of the ECB executives who oversaw this endeavor from the inside and served as the secretary of the jury, was quite open in recognizing the will to understate the political and symbolic dimension of the architectural project. From his perspective, the emphasis on the functional and technical aspects of the building, rather than on its unique status as a supranational institution, spoke to the ‘culture’ of the ECB. On this issue, Gross made an interesting comment: ‘we can actually see that an institution’s approach to architecture reflects its approach to its mission, which can raise some concern’ (2021).

Image and Identity

The functionalist culture of the ECB is well documented, and it is not surprising that it informed the institution’s approach to architecture as well. A recent publication produced by the bank itself points to the fact that ‘the competition brief, the final decision of the jury and the subsequent planning phases focused on the functionality and sustainability of the new premises’ (ECB 2020: 6). However, throughout this process, another important question kept arising: the question of the bank’s image.

Of the 71 competition proposals, 24 were rejected for this reason (Fig. 3): ‘The jury found that the outline concept would not reflect the values for which the ECB stands and would not convey the appropriate image’ (ECB 2003b). On the contrary, the winning proposal by Coop Himmelb(l)au was praised by the jury for its ability to ‘convey a powerful image and reflect the values of the ECB’. 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: no one articulated why any image was deemed appropriate or inappropriate.

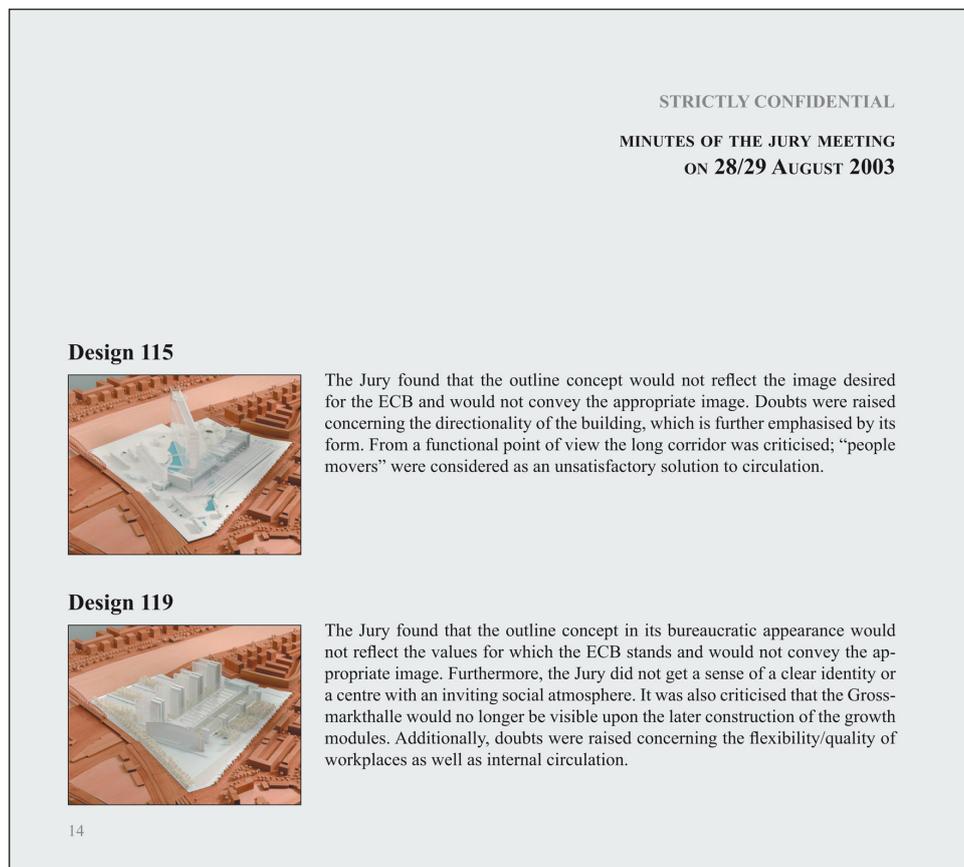


Figure 3: Extract of the jury’s evaluation of two design proposals, underlining the concern with the image of the ECB, 28–29 August 2003. © European Central Bank.

In the aforementioned case of the euro banknotes, this problem was addressed by carefully elaborating a set of architectural images that, while being realistic and somehow recognizable as European, did not represent any existing building. Interestingly, 10 years after the introduction of the euro, as construction of the ECB headquarters was beginning, 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 (Stam 2011). This iconographic transfer from the two-dimensional realm of the banknote to the three-dimensional realm of the building also manifested itself on multiple occasions in the case of the ECB. Historically, this dynamic was the opposite: banknotes tended to depict images of important public buildings, representing the authority in charge of that currency. In the case of the euro, however, the banknote came before the building.

In 2008, as construction of the new ECB premises was about to begin, the Grossmarkthalle became the site of a large-scale light show during *Luminale*, a biennial festival for light art hosted by the City of Frankfurt. The installation, funded by the ECB and curated by Casa Magica, set out to highlight the transformation of the site by beaming a series of ‘motifs’ onto the building’s façade (Casa Magica 2008). In Casa Magica’s work, this type of installation is called ‘architectural projection’. To highlight the market hall’s future role as the ECB headquarters, its long façade was temporarily transformed by colorful projections, using motifs borrowed from banknotes.

Even before construction began, as the need to project some form of image presented itself, the solution was to take inspiration from banknotes. This idea is also evident in some of the renderings produced by Coop Himmelb(l)au. For example, a 2009 rendering of the press briefing room — one of the most prominent spaces in the new ECB premises, as well as the stage where the bank interacts with the public — features a large representation of a 5-euro banknote, which is hung behind the podium like a painting.

From rendering to reality, a similar move was implemented in another key space of the new building — the council room, the inner sanctum of the ECB’s decision-making mechanism. As noted by one of Coop Himmelb(l)au’s architects, there was little room for experimentation in terms of layout: the task was to replicate and optimize the council room of the previous ECB offices in the Eurotower — a conventional council room, with a central round table, that could be easily mistaken for the board room of any other bank (Schwed 2021). In fact, what is now known as the Eurotower was originally the seat of the Bank für Gemeinwirtschaft, built in the 1970s. The ECB council room was so non-specific that, shortly after its inauguration, the management of the bank considered turning it into a restaurant (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 2015).

The only concession to the specificity of the institution was the ceiling. 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’ (ECB 2014: 3). Displaying a map in the council room of a central bank is a common practice. A clear example is the council room of the Federal Reserve Board, which features a large map of the United States. Interestingly, a rare

diverging case is the aforementioned Deutsche Bundesbank. In the central bank of a country that had just been defeated and divided, it would have been difficult to identify an appropriate map; instead, the council room was decorated with surrealist tapestries by Max Ernst — a fitting representation of the state of post-war Germany (Herget 2016: 54).

The ECB decided to take on the challenge of map-displaying because it was perceived as the least problematic, lowest-common-denominator image. But to make it work, the map had to be broken down and deformed, its details radically blurred, especially its borders, to the point where it became almost illegible (Fig. 4). The euro banknotes and coins had already performed this operation ten years earlier and, again, served as the basis for the creation of images in the new building.



Figure 4: ECB council room, featuring the 'Europe ceiling' at the end of construction, 21 October 2014. © European Central Bank / Jens Meyer.

At a speech during the launch of the euro in 1999, Wim Duisenberg, the first president of the ECB, made the case that 'a currency is far more than just a medium of exchange; a currency is also part of the identity of people; it reflects what they have in common, now and in the future' (Iley and Lewis 2013: 220; see also Buscha, Mueller, and Page 2017). In the absence of a clear political project, the euro was bestowed with the monumental responsibility of generating a common identity, including the difficult

effort of elaborating 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, along with the architect and the mayor of Frankfurt, solemnly placed a set of euro banknotes into a metal box that would be laid into the stone (Fig. 5). 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 and physically built upon a banknote (Draghi 2015).

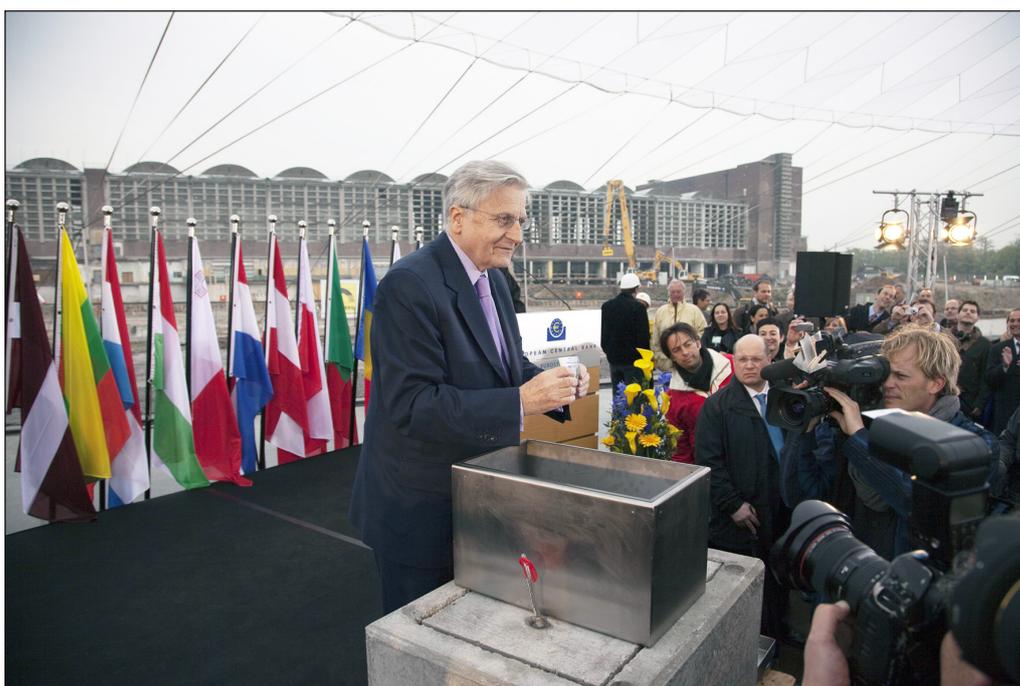


Figure 5: President Trichet places a set of euro banknotes into the foundation stone of the ECB building, 19 May 2010. © European Central Bank / Robert Metsch.

Rituals and Riots

Even though the ECB project, much like the EU itself, was framed in functional, economic terms, certain political dynamics continued to infiltrate the site, sometimes in unexpected ways, especially as the institution adopted an increasingly central political role during the financial crisis. While the ECB tried to focus the competition on technical, utilitarian issues, several public ceremonies throughout the building process forced all actors to address a different set of issues, venturing into the uncomfortable realm of the symbolic and, in one way or another, the political.

The first of such ceremonies occurred in the spring of 2008, in the Schwanenhalle of the Römer, Frankfurt's 15th-century town hall. With the backdrop of a large Renaissance tapestry featuring a battle scene, the mayor of Frankfurt handed over the building permit to the ECB president in front of the media, displaying the transfer of power

from the municipal to the supranational authority. The mayor was also involved in the aforementioned laying of the foundation stone in 2010 — an articulate ceremony that primarily displayed the merger of multiple national central banks into a single European institution. After the set of euro banknotes had been placed into the foundation stone, the directors of all the national central banks of the EU walked by the stone, one by one, and laid down a copy of a newspaper from their country. Wolf Prix, CEO of Coop Himmelb(l)au, was also involved, as he was asked to add the plans of the building into the foundation stone. Resting together within the stone, these architectural drawings constituted the joining of supranational tokens (the banknotes) with national tokens (the newspapers).

Two years later, in 2012, an even more theatrical ceremony marked the topping out of the building's structure. In line with a tradition that spans most of northern Europe, the builders raised a topping-out wreath and placed it atop the tower (Fig. 6). Again, one by one, the governors of the national central bank hung the flag of their country on the wreath, which had already been adorned with blue ribbons displaying 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 small 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.

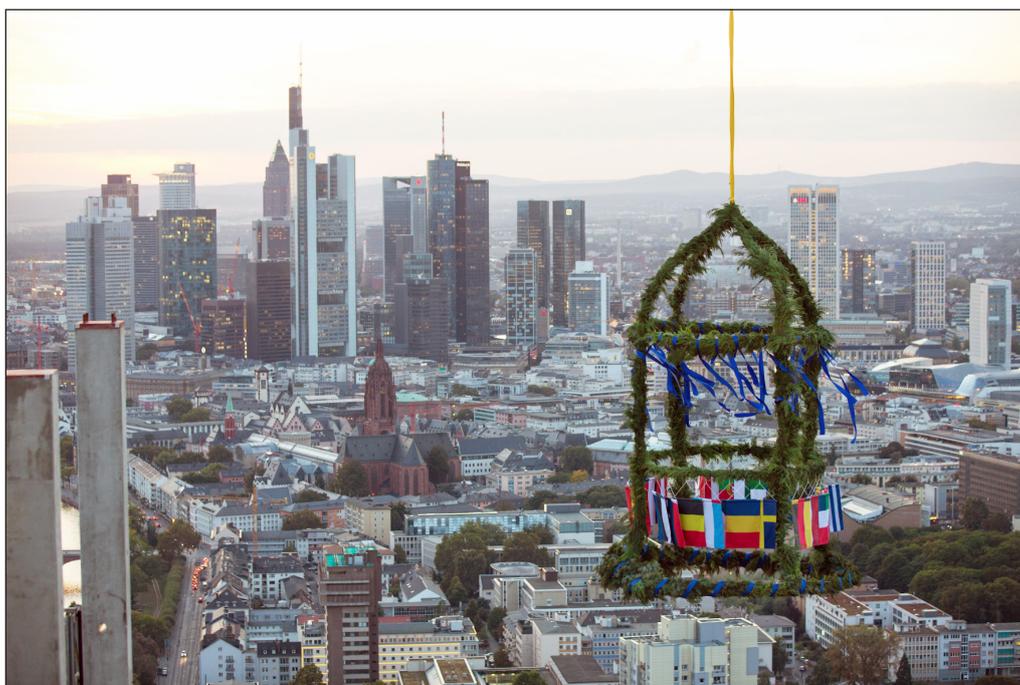


Figure 6: Topping-out ceremony at the ECB building, 20 September 2012. © European Central Bank / Klaus Helbig.

When the project was completed, in March 2015, another ceremony was performed inside the new building, with all the local and European authorities coming together to celebrate. Meanwhile, outside the building, a different set of political forces had begun 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 its inauguration day, the gardens surrounding the ECB high-rise have been occupied by countless rallies and demonstrations. One of the most recent was a Greenpeace demonstration, in which two activists paraglided onto the roof of the building and unfolded a large banner, covering the super-green façade with the following message: 'Stop funding climate killers' (Fig. 7).



Figure 7: Greenpeace paragliders hang a banner on the façade of the ECB building, 10 March 2021. © Greenpeace / Felix Schmitt.

While analyzing the institutional messaging at these events and ceremonies during the construction process, one may notice that the ECB itself gradually started to reassess its own role and priorities. When the ECB acquired the site of the Grossmarkthalle, the

reason given to the public was that it was ‘the most economically viable’ (ECB 2020: 4). At the building permit ceremony in the Rathaus, ECB president Trichet argued that the most important task was the preservation of the historic market hall, minimizing the impact of the new tower (Trichet 2008). Two years later, at the foundation stone ceremony, he said that the priority was to provide the bank with ‘a functional headquarters, while keeping the building costs within the foreseen budget and using our resources responsibly’ (Trichet 2010). At the topping-out ceremony, the main speech was given by Jörg Asmussen, member of the ECB executive board, who focused heavily on budgetary issues, detailing all the costs of construction (in the end, the building was 350 million euros over budget) (Pagliacolo 2015).

But what is worth noting is that, by the time the inauguration came around, the institutional language had started to change. The mayor of Frankfurt began by stating that ‘this project was not just about the balance sheet, but about the European idea as a whole’ (Feldman 2015). He also pointed to Frankfurt’s history as an arena for open political debate and criticism of ‘the excesses of financial capitalism’, drawing a connection between the Frankfurt School and the ECB. The deputy prime minister of Hesse, the Bundesland in which Frankfurt is located, then took the stage and discussed, among other things, the austerity measures of the ECB and the economic situation in Greece. The ceremony culminated with the remarks of the then ECB president, Mario Draghi. While protesters were gathering outside, he talked about the changing role of the ECB, arguing for the ‘need to reconcile the economics of integration with the politics of integration’ (Draghi 2015). He noted that ‘the more decision-making over economic issues moves to the European level, the more democracy needs to move with it’. Part of this process of democratization involved the grounding of the institution in a specific location — a building around which citizens can gather and make their voices heard.

Architecture and Myopia

In her 2017 book *Five Ways to Make Architecture Political*, Albena Yaneva argued that buildings should no longer be seen as ‘political symbols or embodiments of big political forces’ (2017: 7). Similarly to Zaera-Polo, she separated architecture from traditional, overshadowing theories of power — related to ideology, state, nation, government, or activism — and made 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 were 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 political. 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 for the memorial in collaboration with the City of Frankfurt and the local Jewish community (ECB 2009). The design and construction process of the building and the memorial ran in parallel and both were completed in 2015, but the projects had little interaction with each other.

At the inauguration of the memorial, the space was presented as ‘a symbol of why we can never again risk to split apart’ (Draghi 2015). The entire process of European integration had been set up in the aftermath of World War II as a direct response to the horrors of nationalism pushed to its extremes. What happened in those basements across Germany and other countries is the reason the EU was created. While the basement of this new supranational institution in Frankfurt was literally one of the sites where those horrors unfolded, the architectural competition stayed clear of that space, which was addressed as a separate design task. 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 architects’ table.

This case also highlights limitations that do not depend on external forces. The outcome of the ECB competition was determined not only 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 71 architectural firms that took part in the competition, how many knew how European integration worked or how a supranational institution differed from other institutions?

Only one of the short ‘concept outlines’ that each participant had to submit alluded to the uniqueness of EU power and used the term ‘supranational’ (ECB 2003a: 17) (Fig. 8). 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’ (ECB 2003a: 64). 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 firms that proposed some form of garden, with trees or flowers representing all EU member states, include SOM, NHT, BRT, KHR, and United Architects / UN Studio.

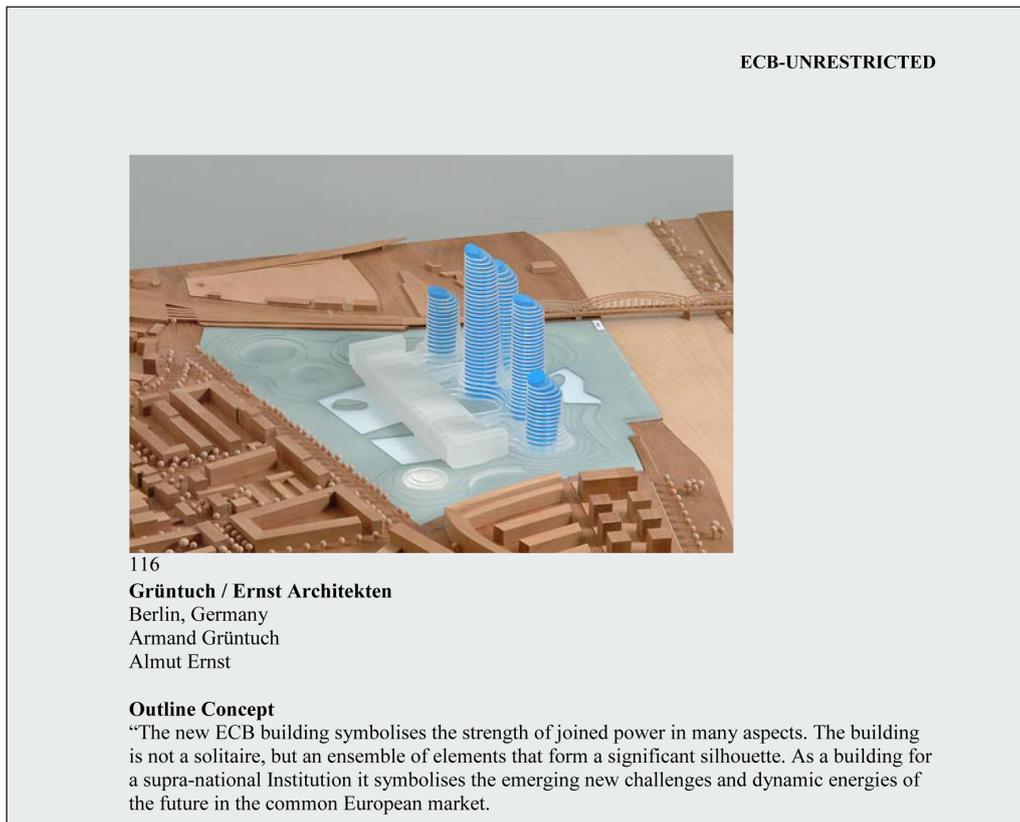


Figure 8: Extract of one of the 71 proposals submitted to the first round of the ECB competition – the only proposal that used the term ‘supranational’, 2003. © European Central Bank.

Notably, a significant portion of the competition participants, the architects at the top of the international game, belonged to the '68 generation — a generation shaped by political activism. For example, Coop Himmelb(l)au was founded in May 1968 (Lavin 2010). Forty years later, when a unique opportunity to reflect on a new form of power appeared, many proposals revealed a lack of interest or competence to address these types of political questions and produce meaningful statements about them, potentially embracing a critical role.

Representation and Depoliticization

Theatrics and symbols have historically played a key role in the architecture of financial institutions and especially central banks (Bergdoll 2001; Belfoure 2005). In

a field characterized by immaterial transactions and high-risk exchanges, the body of the institution was often used as a stage to represent stability and instill a sense of confidence in the users. In the process, architecture was called on to manufacture a tangible image that could help identify this form of power, which most people did not fully understand. Dating back to the 18th century, the Bank of England led the way in this arena, showing that the architecture of money was primarily a problem of representation (Abramson 2005). The project developed by John Soane was essentially a *mise-en-scène* — a sequence of aesthetic experiences, based on references from the history of architecture, which produced a space that conveyed a certain aura and, therefore, could elevate obscure bureaucratic acts to the level of public ritual.

This type of engagement between architecture and power, however, presupposes a degree of clarity and complicity between the public officials and the designers about the identity of the institution and its political mission. When that is the case, the political effects of the building can be controlled and directed in specific ways. Again, in the case of the Bank of England, the architectural project was clearly part of a larger political project, centered on the notion of empire and its commercial underpinnings. In *The Wealth of Nations*, which came out during that time, Adam Smith made the case that this institution was not ‘an ordinary bank’ but rather ‘a great engine of state’ (1776: 249). Soane shared this vision and saw architecture as a key mechanism of this engine. From this perspective, the bank became one of the prime testing grounds for the definition of a modern British architecture, aiming to delineate a concrete representation of national character.

While it belongs to a different era, this example is significant because it shows not only the political dimension of this type of institutional architecture but also its historical entrenchment in the dynamics of nation-building. Notably, both of these forces are antithetical to European integration, which was framed as a project of depoliticization and supranationalization. After World War II, the political was very much understood in a Schmittian sense, as a fundamentally agonistic, conflictual dynamic that led to what everyone had just experienced in a very real way: war between nations (Schmitt 1976; Fusco and Zivanaris 2021).

The withdrawal from the sphere of the political and the push to reframe national identity are key to understanding the difficulty, on the part of the European institutions, to producing a public architecture that can perform a representational function. Given the complex balance in which the ECB exists, architecture is perceived as a minefield, precisely because of its symbolic potential. The struggle to define a handful of images of (fictional) buildings for the euro banknotes had been a preview, at a small scale, of this predicament. Buildings can easily come across as political statements or, at a

minimum, are vulnerable to being turned into sites of engagement and confrontation, even when their makers and users have no such intention (Mouffe et al. 2014).

From this perspective, the case of the ECB highlights two diverging dynamics. On the one hand, the outlook of the institution aligned with an emerging position in the architectural discourse, which was moving away from traditional notions of representation and closer to an object-oriented philosophy (Gage 2015). From this point of view, one could argue that the super-efficient, hyperbolic envelope designed by Coop Himmelb(l)au is actually the perfect representation of an institution that wants to be measured by its technical performance and that struggles to define and express its deeper identity.

On the other hand, the limitations of such alignment came to the fore as soon as the design process began. While approaching this type of building as a reflection of political forces had become somewhat taboo for both the architects and the bank's officials, issues of meaning and image reentered through the back door. Given the importance of the ECB in the framework of European governance, multiple forces tried to fill the semantic space that was left blank by those who drove the project. The example of the Greenpeace demonstration, among others, shows that the absence of endogenous messaging leads to representations from the outside, as the envelope unintentionally becomes a screen for exogenous projections. The technocratic vision of an institutional architecture that frames its power in terms of efficiency and performance clashes with the democratic demand for legible symbols and rituals. Outlining what the institution (and its building) does can only provide a partial answer to the inevitable question of what the institution (and the building) stands for.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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