

The National Bank of
Belgium's museum,
a historical building



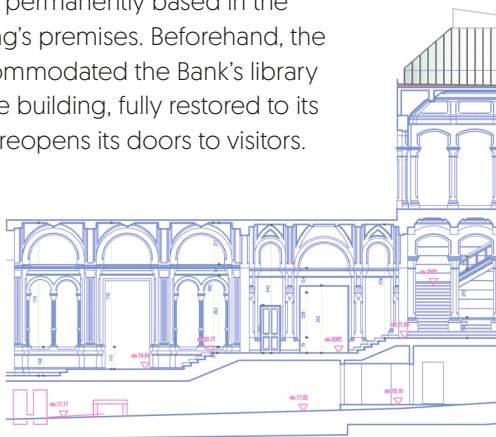
History

From bank to museum

The building that currently houses the National Bank of Belgium's museum was constructed between 1872 and 1874 by order of the Union du Crédit [renamed as Union du Crédit de Bruxelles in 1901], a bank founded in 1848 by banker Jonathan Bischoffsheim. The area where it is located, close to the city's lively avenues, had just been cleaned up and was enjoying a commercial revival.

After a long period of activity as an independent bank, the Union du Crédit de Bruxelles was taken over in 1969 by the United California Bank, which installed a subsidiary in this building. In 1979, the National Bank of Belgium in turn purchased the premises, along with several buildings nearby, to expand its headquarters. The King Baudouin Foundation was allowed to use it temporarily. In 1984, various elements of the building were given listed status. Major restoration work was undertaken between 2004 and 2009.

Since the beginning of 2018, the National Bank's Museum has been permanently based in the former UCB building's premises. Beforehand, the premises had accommodated the Bank's library for some years. The building, fully restored to its former glory, now reopens its doors to visitors.



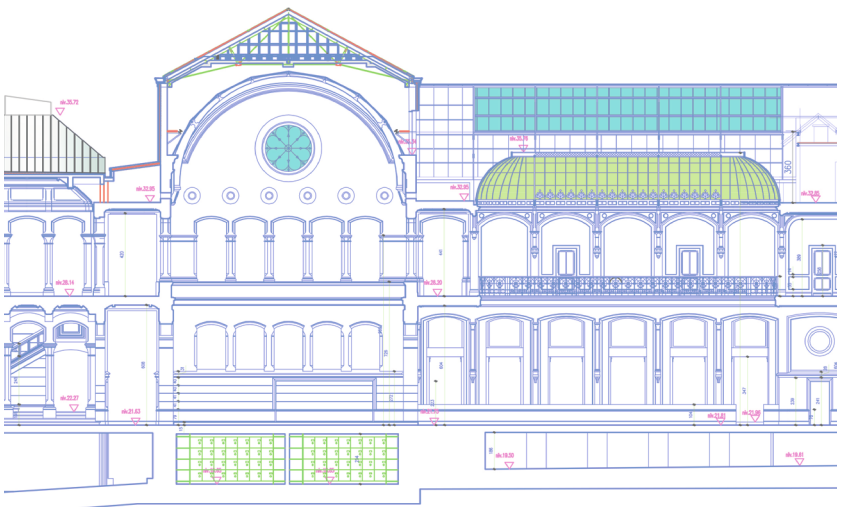
A Brussels creation

The building was designed by architect Désiré De Keyser, who was born and bred in Brussels (1823-1897). He was involved in the massive urbanistic changes, under the mayors Jules Anspach and Charles Buls, that were to transform Brussels. Among his most notable designs were the plans for the Great Synagogue which was raised at number 32, rue de la Régence.

De Keyser opted for a typical late-19th century bank style of architecture, which reflects both authority and prestige. The abundant light and imposing spaces were intended to mirror the institution's power and instil confidence among its clients.

The style of the building is eclectic as it adopts a mixture of elements taken from different styles or eras.

The general concept is classical, but modern building techniques were already appearing,



which is reflected in the presence of the metal framework for the dome. These techniques further grew into the Art Nouveau style, which would reach its zenith at the dawn of the 20th century.

The neo-Gothic influence is reflected in the decorative sculptures depicting plant patterns, smirking devils, faces of women and young people. This decorative style enjoyed particular popularity in the mid-19th century in Belgium. The sculptures were created by the French ornamentalist Georges Houtstont [1832-1912]. He was involved in many other projects in Brussels, such as the Colonne du Congrès, the Royal Conservatory and the National Bank's hôtel du gouverneur.



Restoration

Before the restoration of the building, there was little left of the original construction. Over decades various alterations had changed its character. In addition, severe damage had been caused by dry rot.

The restoration work was carried out under the supervision of the Royal Commission for Monuments and Sites, which had listed the great hall and the counter room with their huge windows, as well as the entrance hall and stairwell owing to their unique nature.

As far as possible, the restorers returned to the original state, each time sufficient concrete and precise indications enabling a reconstitution of the original appearance could be found.

This resulted into an intense restoration of the main components of the building, going from the foundations to the roof, the floors, the walls, the woodwork, the wrought iron features, the sculptures and the windows.

Since, for instance, most sculptures had been lost or badly damaged, replicas were made on the basis of photos and old sketches, falling back on traditional local craftsmen's techniques. The present colour of the walls is the same beige as the original colour, which was recovered under seven successive layers of paint.

As regards the new equipment, including heating, ventilation and electricity supply, both economical as well as ecological solutions were sought for. Facilities, such as the underfloor

heating system under the big dome, have been built in as creatively as possible and are therefore usually invisible.

A walk through the building

The façade

The original façade was not preserved. It had been totally refurbished by the United California Bank and had been demolished in 1991 during the extension works of the National Bank. During the course of the restoration, a new façade was designed after architect De Keyser's original façade.

Entrance corridor

Owing to its size and lavish decoration, this twenty-metre-long corridor sought to make a good impression on customers as soon as they entered the bank. Because the building had been constructed on the hill of Montagne-aux-Herbes-Potagères, various steps are necessary to adjust it to this slope.

Staircase

The stairwell, situated left of the entrance corridor when one comes from outside, is built into a square brick tower. The Union du Crédit's coat of arms, made up of the bank's initials and a honeybee, the symbol of thrift, decorates the columns' bases. Further up, Gothic inspired figures adorn the foot of the small columns.

The original bronze chandeliers, which had been cast by the Compagnie des Bronzes, were all lost. Nevertheless, exact replicas were made by means of photos, drawings and remnants.





Hall

The end of the entrance corridor opens into a huge hall surrounded by a gallery of segmental arches on two different levels. This area is very bright and airy thanks to a large dome that reaches almost 18 meters at its highest point. This window is supported by an openwork steel structure shaped like a barrel vault.

Counter room

The great hall leads on to the former counter room, crowned by an elegant oval window.



Glasswork

Most of the original glassware from the domes in the hall and the counter room had been saved. Only few missing parts were copied. The rose windows in the hall and the horizontal window panes overlooking the counter room are decorated with floral motifs.



For safety reasons [a piece of broken glass falling down 18 metres is a fatal weapon!], the windows were given double glazing during the restoration work. First, a negative of each pane was made. Then, the original panes and the replicas were joined together by a layer of resin so as to produce the double glazing.

Floor

The floor of the building is alternatively covered with natural stone, parquet and magnificent tiles. Restoring the floor was a real job.

The natural stone consists of limestone from Comblanchien (Côte d'Or, France). Some of the original stones are still visible, but most of them had to be replaced by new ones from the same source. The new parquet was laid to match the old flooring, which was in a very bad state.

The ceramic tiles, consisting of 27 different types, all came from the building's original tiling. They were made by the Frères Boch firm in Maubeuge. The current floor covering is the result of a gigantic jigsaw puzzle. The large numbers of damaged or missing tiles left in the areas that are now tiled, were replaced during the restoration work by tiles taken up from other areas, which in turn were covered with natural stone.



Wing

Further along, on the right, the depot was previously bathed in natural light that came through a glass plaque in the roof. The roof's supporting girders, that are still visible today, are original items that have been restored. Since the surface above this room had later been built over, the lighting is now provided by lamps installed above the glass plates, simulating natural light.





Upstairs

The huge staircase takes one up to the first floor with its gallery running entirely around the hall and counter room. Behind the wrought iron railing on the landing of the staircase, used to be an internal garden, whose light is nowadays evoked by the sandblasted, illuminated glass windows.

Looking down from upstairs gives one a rather different perspective of the building and its glasswork, wall decor and floor coverings. The railing along the atrium of the counter room is a beautiful example of ironwork from the building's era.

Cellars

The safe boxes installed in the cellars are a unique and interesting part of banking heritage. Two strongrooms, that had been secured in several ingenious ways, are completely restored to their original state. Private safe boxes cover three sides of each of these vaults.



Art and exhibitions

Since 1972, the National Bank is engaged in building up a fine collection of Belgian art. The works of art are acquired in a spirit of patronage, focusing mainly on Belgian artists or artists living in Belgium. Some of the Bank's works of art are occasionally displayed at the library.

For the inauguration of the refurbished building, artist Pieter Vermeersch [1973] designed a tapestry. It is a site-specific work of art made to fit the place where it is exhibited. During the restoration work, Vermeersch took a photo of the recess at the back of the banking hall, the place where the tapestry

hangs now. He enlarged this photo and reworked it, using several techniques. He actually added a kind of backdrop and left the colour out. The wall tapestry thus seems to have acquired a patina over the years and adds a perfect finishing touch to the restoration of the building.

Pieter Vermeersch commissioned the production of his design from a specialist firm, Flanders Tapestries, thus continuing a long regional tradition of tapestry art.



Museum

The National Bank's Museum attaches great importance to the educational aspect by offering tailor-made and free guided tours and presentations. The emphasis is on the history of money over the centuries and the role the central bank plays in our society nowadays.

- interactive tours with the help of an audio-guide: videos, multimedia tools and games
- museum open to groups and individual visitors
- admission and guided tours (min. 10 participants, reservation essential) free of charge
- adapted tours
- group bookings / information on the website www.nbbmuseum.be

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