

The architecture of banking

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The banks of the industrial age expressed their power and their reliability in buildings. The private bankers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had conducted their business in the houses of their families, behind the discreet façades of the old town. The joint-stock banks of the late nineteenth century built head offices that were designed to impress: massive stone buildings with columns, domes and halls, decorated with allegorical sculptures of commerce, industry and prosperity, which conveyed solidity and permanence to depositors and investors.¹

The head office of the Swiss Bank Corporation in the Aeschenvorstadt, built in stages from the end of the nineteenth century, was such a building. Its banking hall, its strongrooms and its offices for the directors expressed the status of the bank as one of the leading institutions of the country. The Basler Kantonalbank, the cantonal banks of other cities and the insurance companies built similar headquarters. The architecture of the banks became part of the townscape of Basel, around the Aeschenplatz and along the streets that connect the old town with the railway station.

The bank building served a function beyond representation. It was the place where clients deposited their money and valuables. Its strongrooms, protected by steel doors and alarm systems, were the physical guarantee of their safety. The safe deposit box, rented by clients to keep securities, jewellery, documents and gold, became a characteristic service of the Swiss banks. The strongrooms of the Basel banks held the valuables of families from Switzerland and abroad. In times of crisis, when foreign clients feared confiscation or war, the demand for safe deposit boxes in Swiss banks rose.

The modern architecture of Basel's financial institutions shows a different attitude. The tower of the Bank for International Settlements, completed in 1977, is a cylindrical building of glass and metal near the railway station, without columns or allegories. The headquarters of the pharmaceutical companies, the Roche towers and the Novartis campus, designed by

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internationally known architects, express innovation and transparency more than solidity. The contrast between the stone banks of the nineteenth century and the glass towers of the twenty-first reflects the change in the values that financial and industrial institutions wish to communicate.

1 Notes

1. On the architecture of bank buildings in Basel in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (head office of the Swiss Bank Corporation in the Aeschenvorstadt and other bank buildings), see the publications of the Denkmalpflege Basel-Stadt and the Kunstdenkmäler der Schweiz. To be verified. ↩

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