

# THE ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW



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Prague Castle





LANDESGIROKASSE ADMINISTRATION  
BUILDING, STUTTGART, GERMANY  
ARCHITECT  
BEHNISCH & PARTNERS

# RADICAL ENGAGEMENT



Through a rich engagement with urban life, this German bank headquarters confounds conventional notions of office buildings as defensive monoliths.

The Landesgirokasse (State Clearing Bank) is the main savings bank in Stuttgart with hundreds of branches. As it grew, its various operations spread into many buildings, and in 1988 a competition<sup>1</sup> was held for a general headquarters on a site near the Liederhalle. Behnisch & Partners won with a radical proposal for a complex 100 metre tower, but this proved too controversial for the city authorities and was dropped.

A second competition held in 1991 for the current site was again won by the Behnisch office. A tower was clearly out of the question, but the new site was also more intensely urban, calling for a more engaged building. The place is called Bollwerk (bulwark), recalling the fact that it was part

of Stuttgart's later fortifications of 1567, lying then just within the city's north-west corner. Although this is the highest piece of ground in the central area, it has become caught between the old centre and the later west-end, left as a transitional zone lacking in energy. Following war-time damage, the use of the hilltop site as a car park further destroyed the urban continuity, and it was a duty of the new bank building to stitch the area together again, both by making a memorable place at the top of the rise and by adding new attractions for the public.

Seven hundred people work at the bank's new building. Given the relatively generous size of site and the planners' wish that adjacent eaves lines be respected, it made





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- 6, 7  
Translucent planes of water and glass  
collide in the courtyard.  
8  
The glazed foyer encloses generous,  
luminous spaces.  
9  
Detail of roof landscaping.  
10  
Materials, light and spatial  
interpenetrability combine to lift the  
senses.  
11  
Part of the foyer.  
12, 13  
Even the interiors strive to be  
uninstitutional.

effect. It is as if ground and first floor circulation galleries have been left open to participate in the court, then weatherproofed at the last minute. The glass plane even plunges into the pool, dividing the main external water sheet from another inside.

Just as the public look into the court, so internal visitors can look into the continuation of the space from a balcony rail just inside the entrance. As they progress further into the building they cross a glass floor lit from below, again an intriguing invention, but also a happy accident. The concrete structure had been made to earlier plans following the main lines of the two blocks when the architects saw that the busy corner would be too congested, so they filled it in almost on the same angle as the great glass plane. A lighter technology was needed at this stage, but the glass floor also enhances the sense of transparency and continuity between ground floor and basement.

As Behnisch notes: 'The huge facades were a problem for us. The demands and apparent perfection of the facade are disrupted, for we dissolved the network of constructive parts by means of colour and material. Thus the line of a column, for example, can be

taken into graphic play, or a sheet of water can become a mirror, and this makes things free to work beyond their earthly weight and necessity. Things begin to dance – in the end the dancing is more important than the things themselves.'<sup>3</sup>

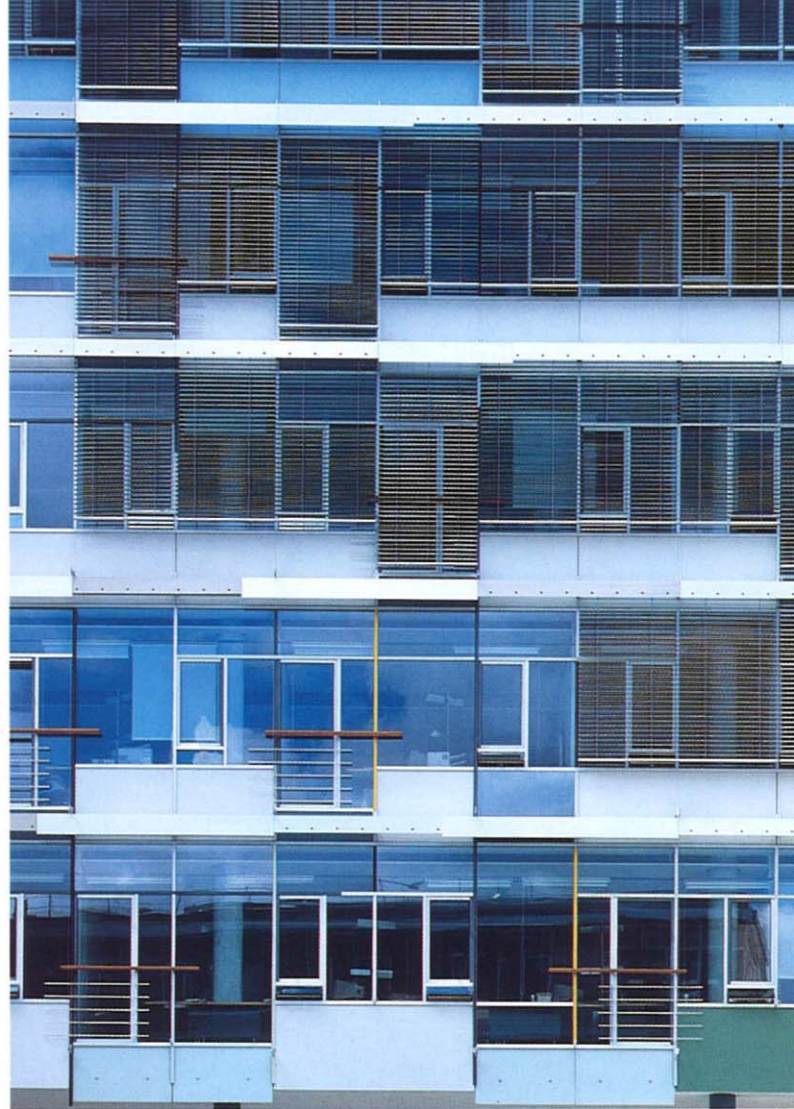
Think of the building without the colour, or the play of reflection and transparency: these effects are essential. The colour scheme fits so well that it is hard to imagine the building without it. Colour choices for most Behnisch buildings are made by Christian Kandzia, the long serving member of the office who also takes the official photographs and organises publications. When he first joined the office, he was a project architect initiating designs, but he gradually found that his gift as an architect lies less at the conceptual end than in the final stages, making adjustments to the finishes and adding colours. It is typical of Behnisch's imaginative way of managing his staff that he has allowed this untypical role to develop. Behnisch and Kandzia have no general colour theory, indeed Behnisch has admitted that 'in our attempts to establish a consistent approach to colour, success has eluded us'.<sup>4</sup> But they do try to avoid colours







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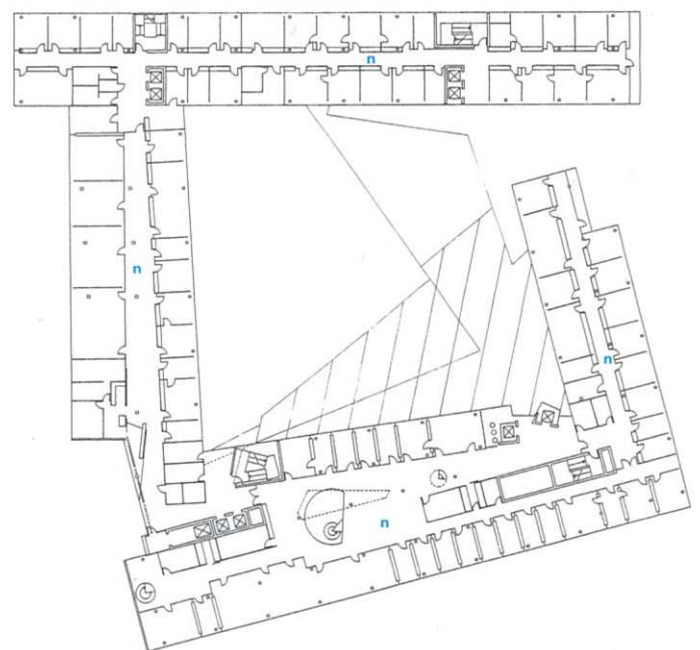


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4  
Part of the poolside walk.  
5  
Detail of typical office elevation.



lower ground floor plan



typical upper floor plan



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building's skyline is quite different. Because of the elevated site, views across the city to the surrounding hills are exceptional, and are exploited with generous windows and terraces. The most dramatic gesture is the cantilevered sky-box projecting over the front facade (an entertainment suite for visitors).

Most invention is lavished on the building parts which hit the ground. This is partly a question of entrance, but most essentially a matter of how the bank engages with the public realm. Its own programme did not offer enough public face to animate all three street-fronts that it owns: the bank itself meets the public realm only at its main entrance, the service entrance at the southern corner, and the self-service cash facility at the northern corner. Unlike most banks, it does not then spend the rest of its frontage being monumental, dead and defensive. Instead, the public face is given to other public functions. There is a stylish Italian restaurant on the corner, a three-auditorium cinema on Hohestrasse to the east; and a lamp shop on Leuschnerstrasse.

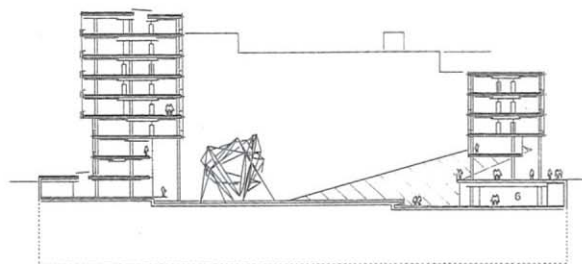
Doubtless chosen to enhance the bank's intended fashionable and progressive image, these tenants are nonetheless independent. They enliven the area, making the bank's territory more public and more penetrable. With its corner position, pavement tables, and canted two-storey glazing, the

restaurant has the hottest site of all.

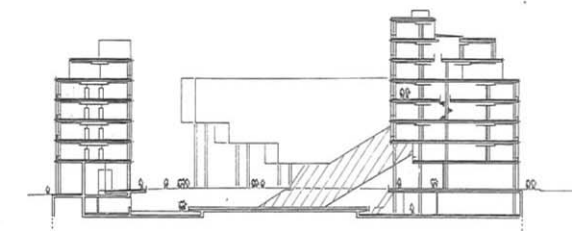
The central court of the building also has a public role, at least visually. This large void was needed by the offices as a light-well and carries on down to basement level, admitting luminance right around the inner perimeter. The ground-space around its northern edge, which gets the best south light, is the outdoor sitting area for the bank's basement cafeteria. The rest of the space is given to a reflective pool which is to be enlivened with a large Frank Stella sculpture. Continuity with street level is assured by the great glazed void on the east side, and by inviting flights of stairs. Seminar rooms at basement level on the north side have to be artificially lit, but because they open into the big foyer space they do not seem cut off from the outside world.

By breaking the front block and leaving the upper floors projecting over as a portico, symbolic entry is invited. The public can walk across to the railings on to the court, where they can enjoy the spectacle of the pond and peer down at staff in the outdoor cafeteria area. They can feel part of the space without entering it, which would pose security problems. Looking to the left, they see the sloping glass plane of the foyer area which links the basement to the ground floor. This dramatic invention is similar in concept to the glass roof at the Ohringen school (AR April 1995), but is here used to much greater

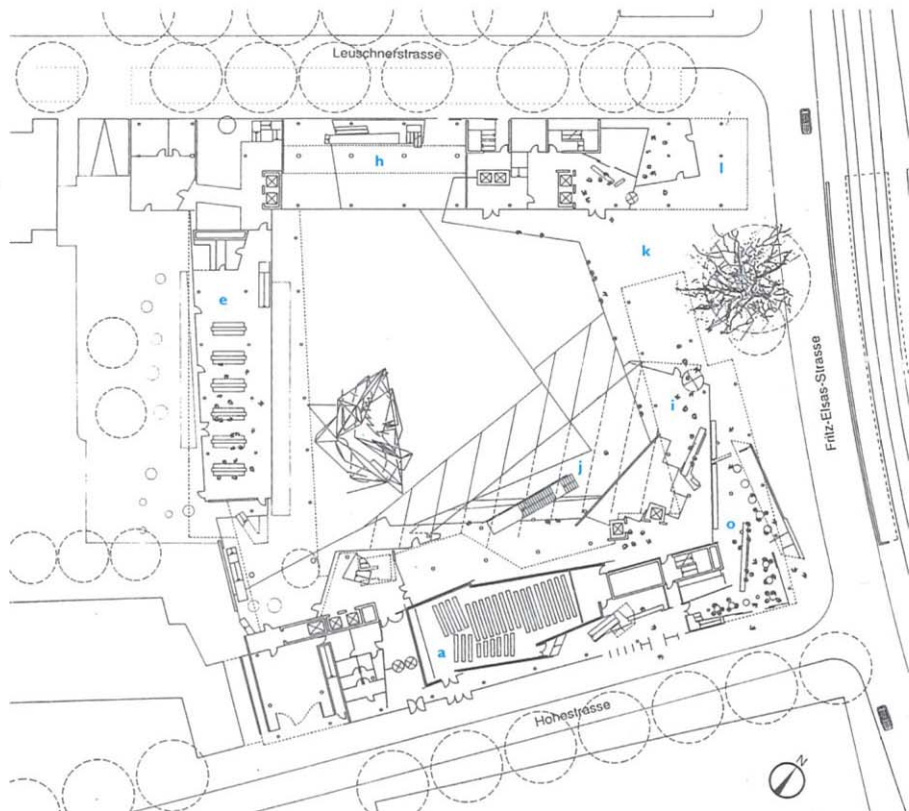
- a cinema
- b training
- c foyer
- d seminar rooms
- e trade centre
- f proposed sculpture
- g cafeteria
- h shops
- i entrance
- j exhibition space
- k entrance forecourt
- l automated banking
- m pool
- n offices
- o restaurant



east-west cross section



north-south cross section



ground floor plan (scale approx 1:1500)





sense to build the perimeter of the block up to heights of five to eight storeys, leaving the centre open. A double-loaded corridor with rooms looking inward and outward was the obvious arrangement, with vertical circulation stacks near the corners. A column and slab structure allows the greatest flexibility, and suggests the adoption of a lightweight semi-transparent facade. All this is pretty standard, but almost immediately variations due to the particular situation start to arise (a Behnisch keyword is *Situationsarchitektur*). In following the street pattern, the plan figure becomes trapezoidal. The office tracts to north and west remain symmetrical and parallel sided, but those to south and east taper, responding to the site shape and allowing the creation of wider communal spaces along the spine. In the upper plans, the widening corridor of the south wing leads to a staff coffee bar with a sudden southward view. In the east wing, the greater width due to squaring off the enclosed court allows the offices to be treated as two buildings linked by vertical service cores. Between these is a broad communal space with floor voids of varying shape, and extra staircases making

direct links between adjacent floors. Such variations in circulation spaces give specific character to the wings and departments, acting as landmarks. Regular views of the outside world through glazed areas at each lift station provide further visual orientation.

In the offices, every effort was made to avoid uniformity. Departments are treated differently: the dealing room for foreign exchange is a big open office space on the lowest three levels of the south wing, for example. It shows itself on the court facade with continuous glazing. Walking through the building, the visitor encounters many different types of office, including those for one or two persons, group offices for four to seven people, and larger combined areas. There are variable partitioning possibilities, but on the whole the bank's policy is to create personal workplaces. Behnisch considers this important for a humane working environment, and he is sceptical of the new fashion for nomads with laptops.<sup>2</sup> The policy for electrical servicing is the standard 150mm floor void.

Office plans in the upper part of the building are largely repeated from floor to floor. But the top level which makes the

1  
A cantilevered sky-box containing the entertainment suite thrusts out over Fritz-Elsas-Strasse.

2  
Office blocks are elevated on columns to create a colonnade, leading to the central courtyard beyond.

3  
The courtyard is dominated by a large, reflecting pool, penetrated by the sloping glass enclosure of the foyer.





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associated with corporate identity and with political parties, and Kandzia is careful how they are mixed. He considers working on site with the newly completed building essential, and he experiments. In some parts of the bank, he says, certain walls are not yet quite right and will be repainted. The Landesgirokasse is the largest building by Behnisch in his home city. In atmosphere and general intention it is not unlike the Herbert Keller House of 15 years ago, the office building for a religious charity in which Behnisch pioneered a new kind of place-making approach to office design (AR June 1985). But unlike the Keller House, which was part of a large typically modern redevelopment with too much landscaped interval space, the new bank has a real old-fashioned urban site. It makes a block and contributes to surrounding streets, besides providing a new landmark at a crucial point in the urban fabric and in the city skyline. It completely vindicates the architects against the oft repeated charge from their ideological opponents that they cannot do urban buildings. The Landesgirokasse is a fully engaged urban building making a new interpretation of the idea of court, and playing new variations on the theme of visual

penetrability. In its responsiveness to specific local incident it stands in a noble urban tradition going back to the contextualism of Theodor Fischer and the Stadtlandschaft ideal of Hans Scharoun. PETER BLUNDELL JONES

- 1 The limited competition was held in July 1991, the ground broken in April 1993, the foundation stone laid in August 1994, the topping out in March 1995, and completion January 1997.
- 2 Günter Behnisch in an interview with Amber Sayah in *Stuttgarter Zeitung* no 142, 24 June 1997.
- 3 Introduction to the booklet *On Colour* produced by the Behnisch office and published by Gerd Hatje, Stuttgart 1993 (bilingual English/German text).
- 4 Behnisch in the same interview, my translation.

#### Architect

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#### Project architects

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#### Project team

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#### Structural engineer

Leonhardt, André + Partner

#### Landscape

Luz + Partner

#### Photographs

Roland Halbel/CONTUR



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