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The Bulgarian National Bank building

The Bulgarian National Bank, Publications Council

Incorporated in 1879, the Bulgarian National Bank is the world's thirteenth oldest central bank.¹ The Bank initially leased a building on Sofia's Slavyanska street, later moving into its own premises, designed by Swiss architect of German descent Henri (Jacob Heinrich) Meyer, on Aleksandar I street. Over the two decades preceding the 1912-13 Balkan Wars, the Bank's activity expanded, leading to the need for new, more spacious and comfortable premises. The two floors added to the building on the Aleksandar I Street after the World War I failed to satisfy the need.

The present BNB Building

The history of the current premises on Sofia's Knyaz Aleksandar I square began on 29th March 1920 when the Governing Council resolved:

...to acquire a plot bounded by four thoroughfares, viz. an undivided city block, and to construct thereon proprietary chambers for the Bank that shall rise to its needs for more than fifty years hence.

Alongside this, the Board endowed a Bank 'Chambers Plot Purchase and Construction Account'. The required funds were to be deducted from annual profits, commencing with the profit for 1919. As early as the following year, the account had accumulated more funds than provisioned by the Governing Council. In the event, even this was to turn out to have been short: the ultimate bill in the late thirties was to be ten times greater.

Construction

In November 1933 the BNB Governing Council adopted Governor Nikola Momchilov's proposal of appointing architect Ivan Vasilyov to conduct the site investigation, propose design drafts for the future premises, and act as the clerk of works. Vasilyov duly toured Western Europe to study the features



The first BNB proprietary premises, designed by architect Henri (Jacob Heinrich) Meyer - BNB Archives

of central bank buildings at first hand. A tender for erecting the concrete structure ran in early 1935, and was eventually won by the Rella u. Neffe A.G. contractors. Excavations began on 1 March the same year.

In a 20th October 1935 ceremony Minister of Finance Marko Ryaskov (who had served as BNB Governor until earlier that year) laid down the building's foundation stone. Custom dictated that he deliver three hammer blows to the stone while intoning the words "May it last unto eternity!" Prime Minister Andrey Toshev and the complete Council of Ministers attended, while Sofia Metropolitan Bishop Stefan conducted Eastern Orthodox consecration rites. A special glass phial containing a scroll recording the event and presenting examples of all coins and bills ever issued by the Bank was set by the stone. Works ended in late 1940.

Architecture and exteriors

The Bank building is an example of modern 1930s architecture combined with classical architectural proportions and Romanticist elements.

The very conception by architects Ivan Vasilyov and Dimitar Tsolov impresses: the authors rejected the idea that the Archaeological Museum building, housed in the refurbished 15th Century Ottoman period Büyük Camii mosque, should be demolished. Instead, they drew a U-shaped edifice whose open end was flanked by the Renaissance Ottoman structure. The museum building coexists harmoniously with the Bank's edifice, facing as it does all four points of the compass.

The architectural plan features modern vertical divisions and functionality. The building does not overpower, yet is seven storeys high. Four of those rise above ground level, three sinking below

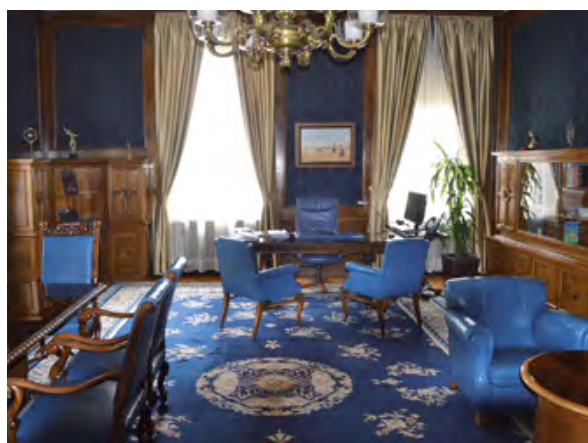
1 Capie, F., G. Charles and N. Schnadt, The Development of Central Banking, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p 6.



The northwestern façade of the current BNB building architectural ensemble - BNB Archives



The building under construction - BNB Archives



The Governor's study - BNB Archives

it. The façades are clad in limestone slabs (quarried near the city of Vratsa) and decorated with sculptures and reliefs alluding to the building's purpose.

The northwestern corner features a clock tower, while another clock sits beneath an elegant pinnacle decorating the western façades. A stone statue by Prof Lubomir Dalchev of Sveti Nikola, patron saint of seafarers, merchants, and bankers, decorates the northwestern entrance. The northern façade houses the sculpted heads of ancient deities Hermes and Fortuna: symbols of success, wealth, and commerce. Over the eastern façade entrance, a stone relief by Prof Luben Dimitrov symbolises strength and endurance: twin lions face each other with an oak leaf and twin acorns between them. The southern façade's top floor carries a large sculptural composition by Kiril Shivarov depicting Hermes and Fortuna. Beneath it, at street

level, is a granite drinking basin and fountain decorated with a bronze leonine head.

Covered in dark green patinated bronze, the four main entrance doors carry relief motifs from the seals and coinage of 13th century Bulgarian rulers Tsar Ivan Asen II and Tsar Konstantin Tih Asen.

The interior

The interior combines the designers' striving for a sense of spaciousness through the greatest possible ingress of natural daylight into the premises, and purposeful functionality.

The mezzanine facing the main entrance lobby houses the tellers' hall, topped with a huge skylight. The eastern and western wings of the first floor have open galleries over the hall; another gallery graces the fifth floor, in the tower. A discrete staircase amid the tellers' hall leads to the underground public safe deposit vault, whose

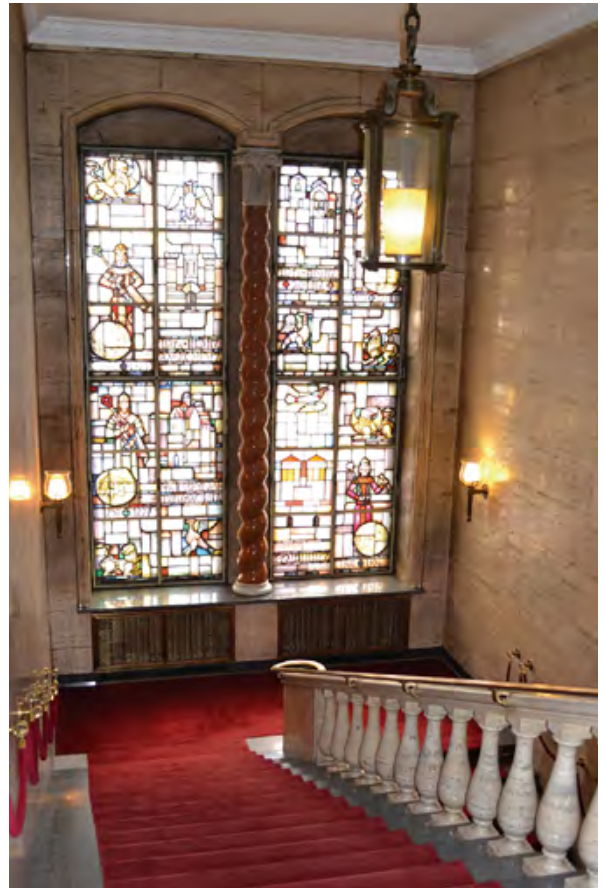
architectural elucidation, and the quality of materials and workmanship, rank among the very best of their period. Spiral staircases at each corner of the hall lead to ground level.

The numerous stairways and passages between individual areas convey a sense of spaciousness. A number of technical solutions which were advanced for their time enhance the building's functionality: the spacious safe deposit vault, lifts intended for diverse loads, and the sinuous copper piping of the pneumatic capsule pipeline.

The four grilles on the tellers' hall entrance doors feature bronze lions holding heraldic shields with diverse motifs symbolising Bulgaria's major industries at the time: manufacturing, agriculture, and commerce. They were wrought by Prof Mihaylo Parashchuk, who also decorated the face of the large clock on the southern wall of the tellers' hall and designed the exquisite



The Governing Council Chamber - BNB Archives



A stained glass window by Prof Ivan Penkov; made by Franz Mayer & Co. of Munich. - BNB Archives

Musharabiya stonework grilles. These latter are placed over internal windows facing the hall.

The decorative and monumental pieces in the bank building include a number of stained glass murals. Designed by Prof Ivan Penkov, the western staircase vitrage depicts coins minted by the Second Bulgarian Empire between the 12th and 14th centuries; images of the Tsars Ivan Asen II; Konstantin Tih Asen; Ivan Aleksandar; Ivan Sratsimir; and images of several architectural ensembles from the same period. Designed by Prof Dechko Uzunov, the governing council chamber stained glass window features motifs from Bulgarian commercial life. The chamber's interior décor, alongside that of the Governor's study, has been preserved unchanged. Both vitrages were made at the Franz Mayer & Co. workshops in Munich. A new stained glass window designed by Prof Nikolay Drachev was installed at the central staircase in 2006.

The bank building has a special corner reflecting Bulgarian history: the memorial wall and eternal flame commemorate the names of BNB staff who fell in the 1912–13 and 1915–18 Wars for Bulgarian National Unification and National Defence.

Art

In the tradition of significant financial institutions maintaining extensive art collections, the BNB opened its doors to the arts from its very incorporation. The first works acquired were the sculptures, entitled 'Gloire au Travail' by Henri Louis Levasseur, which won a gold medal at the 1882 Paris Salon des Beaux Arts; and Andrey Nikolov's 1916 'Detski San'. The collection encompasses works by dozens of other eminent Bulgarian artists. The predominant part of paintings, sculptures and carvings are displayed around Bank offices and halls, while the eastern wing gallery traversing governing council member

studies features the portraits of each BNB Governor since incorporation.

Museum

The western wing gallery houses a standing museum display. The idea for its creation arose at the end of the twenties. The first exhibition of coinage and bills was held in the teller's hall in 1969. The current display opened in 1999 as part of marking the Bank's 120th anniversary. The unique collection presents a wealth of classical and mediaeval coinage dating to the 5th century BC, and which were discovered on Bulgarian soil. Also present are: coins issued by the BNB; the history of BNB banknote issue since 1885; and the Bank's role in issuing national currency, managing cash circulation, and destroying withdrawn cash.

A landmark of the Bulgarian capital, the Bulgarian National Bank building was listed as a Nationally Significant Monument of Culture in 1978. ●



The Eastern Wing gallery with portraits of BNB Governors since incorporation. - BNB Archives



The Memorial Wall listing the names of BNB staff, who fell in the wars for Bulgarian National Unification and National Defence. - BNB Archives



The BNB Standing Museum Display - BNB Archives

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