

BANK

When I was in ninth grade my aunt got me a job as a messenger boy at the Swiss Credit Bank, (now Credit Suisse), in the financial district. It was a pre-internet job, mainly carrying important checks from one bank to another. Of course I knew nothing of finance or banking. My memories of that job are about architecture. Our nation's financial system did not enter into my very uninformed fascination with the power of these edifices. I was overwhelmed every day by a sense of the grandeur of the spaces I was obliged to visit: the Bankers Trust building, the Federal Reserve Bank, the then newly completed Chase Manhattan Plaza.

For me these were primarily places of physical mystery and tactility. My memories were of muscular structure and rich materials. A myriad of textures were made visible through a play of beautifully modulated light. It was also a visceral response, centered in my body, felt through my feet, my hands, and my skin. On sweltering hot summer days I looked forward to the cool, dark, silent interiors. There were the smells of waxed floors, wood polish, sometimes a wafting of sea air from the harbor. Sounds were reflective, bouncing off the polished surfaces of glass and stone, the scale of the spaces muffling voices, the sound of footsteps and machines humming.

These were spaces accessible to all, just steps from the very public sidewalks of lower Manhattan. It is entirely conceivable that these spaces were just as public as the sidewalks themselves and I believe there were a fair share of loiterers for whom the banking halls had little to do with banking. These were extensions of our shared space of the city. In many ways they were as public as Grand Central Station, the New York Public Library, St. Patrick's Cathedral, or the Metropolitan Museum of Art. As such these spaces determine our city. They are places for potential congregation with our fellow citizens, more intimate than a street, less intimate than our residences.

These were the primary places for architecture as presented to the public. Surrounding them, providing a buffer from the outside world, were the interstitial zones provided for bank work. These were the zones primarily designed with function in mind, allowing the free and efficient flow of information between bank departments. The vertical plane between these two zones was the formal boundary between bank worker and bank client.

Historically there is no difference in the methods and styles architects have chosen to depict these very public places. A neo-classicism or a modernism in skilled hands can equally well for a post office, a church, or a railroad terminal. The architects responsible for these projects were involved in describing the public nature of construction in the city, and by default, determined what public space is. The means by which we make these descriptions are our own, they deal with qualities more important than style. We manipulate the substances of architecture, and by default create what is left, space.

To what can we aspire as a culture of city dwellers? Invariably as architects we can describe only our emotional and physical needs as an urban society. We can hope to encourage the wonder that excites the visitor to the city, to lead them to a shared understanding of the public realm and what it is that binds us together.

Robert Marino, December 2014