

EFFECTS OF URBAN MEGA PROJECTS – CASE OF THE NEW ECB HEADQUARTERS IN FRANKFURT

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Summary: Frankfurt is one of the most international cities in Germany, with well-established identity of financial capital of both the country and the European Union. Still, city image of this modern global metropolis, marked by its distinct skyline, was significantly modified after the new premises for the European Central Bank (ECB) headquarters were constructed outside of the established high-rise zone. The new prime urban landmark also served as a flagship for comprehensive spatial conversion of the brownfield riverfront area, as well as initiator of social changes in the Ostend district.

Keywords: Urban mega projects, urban development, city image, Frankfurt, new ECB headquarters

1. INTRODUCTION

During the past two decades, urban mega projects (UMP) became almost regular practice for initiating urban and political change. Their ability to instantly redefine not only image of places but of whole cities became useful tool for boosting place specificity and attractiveness all over the world. Often being considered as “the mechanisms par excellence through which globalization becomes urbanized” (Swyngedouw et al. 2003: 3), UMPs play an important role in the rapid physical and symbolical transformation of the 'Third World' cities into the 'First World', being probably one of the most extreme global urban phenomena currently occurring (King, 2004, 16-18). However, such activities are also often used within European cities as well, particularly to enhance city image and foster urban development and transformation of less attractive or brownfield areas. In this paper the focus will be set on Frankfurt in Germany, which recreated its identity after the fatal war destructions on the bases of its long tradition in trade and banking, to become today not only financial capital of the country, but of the European Union as well. In accordance to such development directions, contemporary image of this city is established on particularity of the skyline in close vicinity to its historical centre, as a rarity in European cityscape. Nevertheless, high-rise development in Frankfurt was a very complex task marked by initial public rejection, long debates among professionals, and conflicts between traditional and modern (Čamprag, 2014;

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2015), to finally become characterized by compromising clustering principle. Significant effects both on Frankfurt's skyline and on its image of global metropolis made the exceptions that construction of the new European Central Bank's (ECB) headquarters enjoyed. This iconic, flagship project also initiated a variety of other long-term accompanying effects both on the Ostend district and on the city as a whole.

2. NEW URBAN LANDMARK AS A FLAGSHIP FOR URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS

European Central Bank (ECB) started operating in 1998, in rented offices at several locations in Frankfurt's financial district.² The later initiative to construct its own premises was justified as more economical solution in the long-term period, besides the need to bring all the employees together on one site (New ECB Premises, 2010: 4). According to the feasibility study prepared by the Frankfurt based architecture office *Jourdan & Müller* in 1999, one of the most suitable location for the construction of the new ECB premises was the site of the old wholesale market in Ostend district (*Newsletter 1*, 2008).

Having a long industrial history, Ostend district was always one of the less affluent parts of the city (*Newsletter 5*, 2012). Industrial and logistics companies gradually developed their facilities and warehouses along the river Main, while many manufacturers, workers and retailers, often with foreign background, were all attracted by the job opportunities and lower rental price ranges in the area. However, along with the weakening of the industrial sector during the last decades, port and shipyard areas gradually became underused and partially neglected, which later initiated a necessity for their conversion and urban reintegration. Since the last decades of the 1980-es, due to both its attractive location alongside the river, and its proximity to the city centre, riverfront in Ostend came under comprehensive urban transformation, along with its functional transition from industry to services. The later recommendation by *Jourdan & Müller* to construct new ECB headquarters in this part of the city was justified by the site's well integration in the infrastructure systems, optimal spatial and security requirements, as well as by sufficient space for eventual further constructions and extensions.³

The purchase agreement between the City of Frankfurt and the ECB was signed early 2002 (*The Grossmarkthalle*, 2010: 4-5). Construction started in 2010, according to the revised design concept by Viennese architecture office *Coop Himmelb(l)au*, which won design competition in 2005 (*New ECB Premises*, 2010: 4). The concept foresaw a building ensemble, emerging through conversion of the existing Market Hall, and its incorporation with the newly designed facilities - double high-rise skyscraper joined by an atrium, and entrance building, connecting the two elements into a unique ensemble. The design also included underground car parking and ancillary buildings, accommodating gatehouses and logistics centre. The total gross floor area of the new ECB premises amounts to approximately 185,000 m² (*New ECB Premises*, 2010: 8).

² The main seat of the ECB was the "Eurotower" at Kaiserstrasse 29; the other two locations were the former Commerzbank office building (Neue Mainzer Strasse 32-36) and the "Eurotheum" (Neue Mainzer Strasse 66).

³ Source: <https://www.ecb.europa.eu/ecb/premises/intro/location/html/index.en.html> 2015-03-06

One of the most aggravating factors in the project design and realization certainly concerned conversion and reintegration of the existing Wholesale Market Hall (*Großmarkthalle*), built in 1928. Besides its outstanding architecture, this building represents heritage with a strong intangible component in its history that needed to be taken in consideration when designing the overall redevelopment strategy. Namely, the basement rooms of the Market Hall served from 1941 to 1945 as a collective point for over 10,000 Jewish citizens before their deportation to concentration camps. Other controversies that followed development of the project started with removal of the several annex buildings, and culminated by the planned connection between existing and new parts of the complex, which technically involved demolition of several concrete segments and intersection of the new part through the hall (figure 01, left). Its architects insisted on such a dramatic act of both components complementing each other to produce distinct landmark, and justified the demolition with intervention on the part of the building that was reconstructed after the 2nd World War damage.

As the new ECB headquarters is positioned at the intersection between the two important urban green spaces in Ostend district, the remaining gap between the *Ostpark* and the riverside was planned for connection and integration. These important urban green spaces involve the *Mainuferpark*, running along the riverside, and the *GrünGürtel*, which represents the green belt encircling the city. The *Mainuferpark* promenade was also extended through the conversion of the former shipyard *Ruhrorter Werft*, which was out of use since the 1980-es, opening the district to the riverside with favourable position regarding view of the skyline in the financial district. Construction of the new café-restaurant with viewing platforms followed in 2012, combining the preservation of the two heritage-listed coal cranes from 1911 and 1912. At the end of the promenade, vast brownfield area was turned into the new *Hafenpark*, arranging the zone as a compromise between areas for various sports and free time activities, and green promenade along the riverside. Final touch to the whole complex should be a memorial for the deportations of Jewish citizens during the Nazi dictatorship.

Further away from the riverside, opposite of the ECB towers is the so-called *Honsell-Dreieck* brownfield area, planned for construction of a large shopping centre to cover a total area of approximately 82,000 m². This development aims to support mixed-use character of the area, by including diverse planned functions: a shopping mall, cinema, hotel, gastronomy, offices and parking facilities.⁴ Along with the full conversion of empty zones on the riverside into new urban focal point, the whole area is also subjected to extensive infrastructure reconstruction. The planned connection with the southern district of *Sachsenhausen* was realized through the new bridge, designed by architect Ferdinand Heide together with the *Grontmij GmbH*. The new urban landmark on the river kept the simple arch structure with illuminated crossed cables, through which is achieved a harmonious ensemble with the existing *Honsellbrücke* Bridge from 1911.⁵ Finally, the whole ensemble on the river should be finalized with the 60- meter high-rise hotel with a spectacular view that should embellish the peak of the pier, between the two bridges. However, construction of this building is still uncertain.

⁴ Source: <http://www.main-frankfurter-osten.de> 2013-01-26

⁵ Source: <http://www.stadtplanungsamt-frankfurt.de> 2013-01-26

3. THE MAJOR EFFECTS OF THE PROJECT

Effects of the new ECB headquarters construction on the city as a whole are primarily induced both by its attractive design and prominent location. According to the official description of the project elaborated by the architectural design firm *CoopHimmelb(l)au*, the starting point for the design of the towers were precisely urban perspectives of the city.⁶ Shape, orientation and heights of the two joined towers were designed in such a manner to get a 'striking profile' that is visible from all important reference points in the city centre and from the river Main. In this way, the designers not only intended the new towers to become a new landmark of the Frankfurt's skyline, but also its characteristic feature. In combination with typology of the new complex, the towers were also intended to become a new symbol of both Europe and the EU.⁷ All of these features are on the one hand referring to the immense importance of the design of the new ECB complex for boosting city image and competitiveness of Frankfurt as an 'alpha world city'. On the other hand, such an image is also in close connection with the existing high-rise and skyline, whose development in Frankfurt was kept under control by the High-Rise Development Plan. This plan advocates for clustering high-rise buildings within the inner city to avoid urban sprawl, preserve and protect historical district, as well as urban residential and green areas (*Hochhausentwicklungsplan*, 2008). In order to ensure stay of the ECB in Frankfurt, which was of extreme importance for the city officials after the Bank made decision to construct its own premises, special concessions exclusively allowed its construction far away from the skyscrapers zone, in contrary to the principles set by the High-Rise Development Plan. As a consequence of the compromising solution, the city's skyline was radically extended towards the east, which on the one hand redefined the overall urban scale, but on the other served as an asset for the architects to create exciting dialog between the two confronted sides (figure 01, right). The new ECB headquarters also hold the role of a flagship project for conversion of the brownfield riverfront area and for overall upgrade of the Ostend district. Construction of the new iconic towers initiated improvements of the district's infrastructure and conversion of the surrounding brownfield land into attractive urban parks and consumption and leisure oriented spaces, but is also expected to promote Frankfurt as the 'city on the river' through establishment of the missing link between Ostend district and the river Main (*New ECB Premises*, 2010: 7). On the one hand, important role in the new concept for conversion of the brownfield site played its industrial and built heritage, above all the Wholesales Market Hall. However, filtration of heritage for the sake of achieving attractive architecture of the district meant commodification of its history. Destruction of the annex buildings and partial demolition of the Market Hall itself arguably accomplished both structural and functional needs of a new iconic ensemble, revealing thereby a certain victimization of heritage for achieving contemporary development goals. This project is thus not only an example of a strong stylistic juxtaposition with heritage landmarks, but also of a heritage that has been assigned a completely new, even alien use. On the other hand, equally important for

⁶ In: The New Premises of the European Central Bank (ECB) in Frankfurt am Main - Detailed Design, 2007

⁷ Source: 'The International Herald Tribune'; <http://global.nytimes.com/> by Dougherty, Carter; 16 November 2004. Retrieved from <http://en.wikipedia.org> 2013-03-12

conversion of the brownfield area was the issue of sustainability as a matter of competitiveness to create an image of an environmentally aware city. In sum, the project for the new ECB headquarters combined attractive design, heritage and sustainability issues not only to upgrade the brownfield location, but also to enable legitimate competition with the similar projects globally.

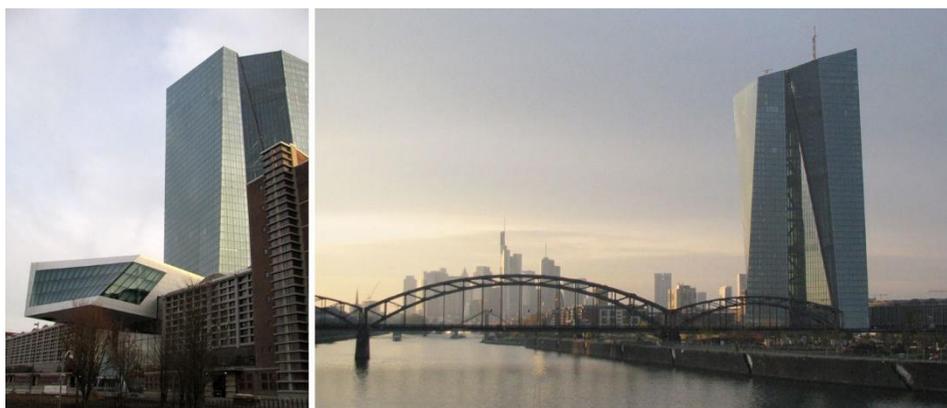


Figure 1. New ECB towers connecting with the Wholesale Market Hall (left) and adding a new dimension to Frankfurt's skyline, with financial district in the background (right).

Photo: Author, September 2014

Besides comprehensive spatial changes on local and regional level, it is also important to reflect social effects of the project – above all the issue of on-going polarisation and gentrification processes occurring in Ostend district. During the past ten years, Frankfurt faces the problem of rapid increase of its inhabitants, which finally reflected itself on the dynamics of spatial and social changes, especially in formerly less affluent urban areas. Introduction of the new ECB headquarters in the middle of modest, typically working class Ostend district already induced rising of rents and property prices, making it equal with some of the most prestigious urban zones in Frankfurt. In addition, many empty lots in the near vicinity of the new ECB complex were built, old buildings renovated, and infrastructure adapted to satisfy consumption patterns of the higher middle class, causing gradual displacement of the local residents. However, the problem of rising social polarisation is not only a matter of the district, but of the whole city as well, symbolically represented in the paradox of the new ECB complex functioning outwards as a supreme urban landmark, but is in fact an introverted gated community, an urban fortification secured by fences and ditches due to the rising security reasons.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Conversion of the Ostend riverfront, commenced with the construction of the new ECB headquarters, made significant effects reflecting in different ways and on several levels. On the one hand, considering the local level, this iconic project is detached from its

direct environment in both spatial and social contexts, but its significance on the urban, national, and international level as a landmark is unprecedented. As shown by this case study, besides numerous benefits for urban marketing, city image and competitiveness, the most common negative aspect of UMPs is placement of the focus on profitability at the sake of local issues. In order to avoid such negative consequences, the final result of such projects should more significantly address public benefit, along with production of competitive, as well as diverse urban neighbourhoods.

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ЕФЕКТИ КАПИТАЛНИХ ПРОЈЕКТА - НОВО СЕДИШТЕ ЕЦБ У ФРАНКФУРТУ

Резиме: Франкфурт је један од најинтернационалнијих градова у Немачкој, са препознатљивим идентитетом финансијске престонице земље, али и Европске Уније. Међутим, на слику ове модерне метрополе, окарактерисане особитом силуетом небодера, значајно је утицала изградња новог седишта Европске Централне Банке (ЕЦБ) изван плански утврђене зоне екстремне високоградње. Нови главни градски симбол је послужио и као иницијатор не само потпуне конверзије браунфилд речне обале, већ и значајних социјалних промена у дистрикту Остенд.

Кључне речи: Капитални пројекти, урбани развој, слика града, Франкфурт, ново седиште ЕЦБ