

Latvijas Banka's building – 100

How construction began



Latvijas Banka's building in Riga, located at K. Valdemāra iela 2A, was constructed 100 years ago as a building specifically designed for the needs of the bank. Since 1918, when Latvia became an independent state, the history of this building has been closely tied to all decisions regarding the state's financial system and the establishment of the national currency.

The grandeur of Latvijas Banka's main building immediately captivates visitors with its spaciousness, luxurious and representative staircase and halls, as well as the characteristic ambiance of the bank, manifested in the arrangement of rooms. Both its size and opulent interior emphasise the building's purpose and enhance the impression of the bank's authority. With the centenary of the building approaching, historian Maija Āboltiņa conducted a study titled "Latvijas Bankas ēka: celtniecības vēsture" ("Latvijas Banka's Building: Construction History"). We would like to introduce the interested parties to the rarely seen pages of the building's history and draw attention to its interior elements.

The State Bank of Russia required a larger building, so it acquired an area of 1116 square fathoms (*сажѣнь*; one square fathom is approximately four and a half square metres) located within the territory of the fortification system of the city and Riga Castle built outside the city walls of Riga (known as *Pilsgrāvis*). The territorial plan and visual landscape of this location were recorded by J. K. Broce in the late 18th century. Scientists have concluded that the current Latvijas Banka's building at K. Valdemāra iela 2A is situated in the area formerly comprising "a construction material shed, a wooden comedy theatre, and *Citadele*" (see the image below). Before the construction of the new building, the State Bank's Riga Office was located at Lielā Pils iela 12, in a building specifically constructed for the needs of the State Bank, which was later transferred to the State Treasury because the premises became too small.

In May 1901, the State Bank's Riga office informed the Riga City Council about the start of the construction of the new office building. The foundation stone-laying ceremony took place on 27 June (10 July) 1902. The construction costs were estimated at around 700 000 rubles. The newspaper *Рижский вестник* described the construction progress on 28 August 1902 as follows:

"... during the summer, work has been progressing rapidly at Jacob's Square near the castle. So far [from 27 June to 27 August], the basement level of the building – which will house the vault for cash and securities – has been constructed. The first floor and half of the second floor have been completed. The entire building is being constructed using light yellow bricks supplied from the brick plants in Valgunde, near Mitau [Jelgava]. More than 100 workers and about 30 carts delivering construction materials are engaged in the works over the entire summer. By the onset of winter, it is planned to have the building under a roof, and the building will be left like this until the next construction season to dry. The [daily] wage for construction workers ranges from 70 kopecks to 1 ruble and 60 kopecks. The whole construction is quite substantial, and the brick wall is durable; the walls are thicker than a yard [*аршин*; one yard is approximately 0.71 metres]."

In January 1905, the building was put into operation.

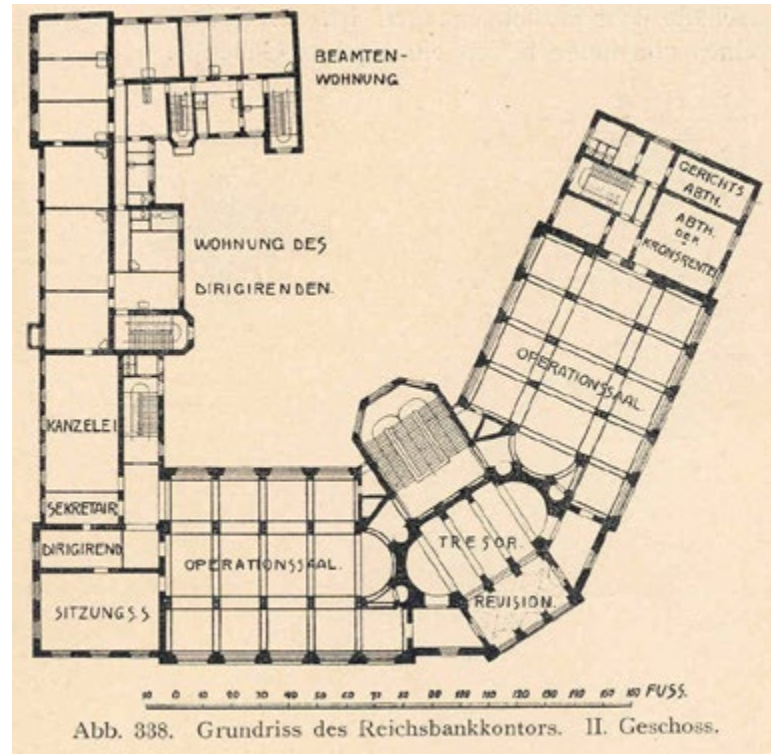


Bank's interior

The bank's project was developed according to the standardised construction regulations accepted by the State Bank of Russia. The functional layout of the bank's premises was created based on the sketches by the State Bank's architect R. Golenishchev. The plans for the residential building and courtyard building, as well as the facade and decorations for the entire structure, were designed by architect Augusts Reinbergs (1860–1908), who was entrusted with overseeing the construction work. However, the architectural honour goes to Augusts Reinbergs. According to literature, he is the author of all facade drawings, all decorations, as well as the layout of the bank's residential and auxiliary buildings in its courtyard.

The architecture of the time often followed the prevalent eclectic style, with the facade designed in restrained Florentine Renaissance forms, emphasising the monumental nature and importance of the state institution – the bank.

In 1905, the periodical publication *Illustrierte Beilage der Rigaschen Rundschau* wrote about the new building: "Due to its open placement, the building freely opens up to the eyes of all viewers. The large objects denote the public character



Second floor of the bank's bulding, published in Riga und seine Bauten, 1905.

View of the bank's building. On the right – the monument dedicated to the victory over Napoleon in 1812. (1910, LV KFFDA)



of the territory: the tall and wide arched windows allow us to infer the spacious dimensions of the interior, and the division of the facade with meticulously crafted details fully reveals the characteristic architecture of the Renaissance style."

Upon entering the first floor, there is an anteroom, a cloakroom, and "a lobby leading directly to the 11-foot [1 foot is approximately 30 cm] wide three-span main staircase with dark polished Belgian marble railings. Four luxurious candelabra are placed on high marble pedestals. Here, it appears that visitors find themselves in a lavish castle-like building."

On the second floor, symmetrically located on both sides, there are transaction halls. These halls are 65 feet long and 62 feet wide, illuminated by large windows on both sides. Rows of two

columns divide these spaces into three naves. The dominant ceiling and wall tones in all rooms are in light colours, making the rooms appear even more spacious. Plaster ornaments are found only in the main staircase area, the main transaction halls, and the conference hall. The simplicity of the layout in these rooms is enhanced by meticulously crafted stylistic profiles. This uniformity in the rooms simultaneously imparts a harmonious and dignified character.

More luxurious interior decorations were present in the rooms used by the bank's visitors as well as in the assembly hall. In the wall and ceiling decorations, laurel leaf wreaths and garlands, flowing ribbons, rosettes, and cornucopias are visible. As a symbol of trade, the bank used motifs of Mercury's hat and caduceus, while laurel leaf wreaths symbolised its authority.

An interesting detail, characteristic of the era, in the buildings of state institutions at that time was the construction of residential spaces for employees. In the bank's building, there was a separate residential wing located along what was then Nikolai Street (now K. Valdemāra iela) and containing the apartments of the leading bank officials with an appropriate level of comfort. The dining area was located on the third floor, while the basement housed the premises of the attendants to the bank officials and security personnel. In the basement, central heating and ventilation equipment was also located. Central heating eliminated the need for open flames, only apartments were fitted with tile stoves and cooking stoves. Electric lighting was used. The air flowing into the building was heated, humidified and purified from dust and dirt beforehand.

In the courtyard, an auxiliary building was constructed, housing a stable, a carriage house, and laundry. Special safety measures were taken to prevent possible fires or thefts in the premises of the Cashier's Office, which were expected to be equipped with safes later on. In all bank's premises, the ceilings and walls were constructed from non-flammable



Lifting of the safe, 1920s. The works are managed by Pauls Tīlemanis, master locksmith of Riga. Following nationalisation, his workshop, located at Anglikāņu iela 3, was transferred to Latvijas Banka. The photograph was given to Latvijas Banka by the daughter of Pauls Tīlemanis on 10 August 1993.



Transport of cash from the Riga Office of the State Bank of Russia to the post office.

(Early 20th century, LV KFFDA)

materials – bricks and reinforced concrete (Latvijas Banka was one of the first buildings in Latvia to use reinforced concrete), and the roof was made entirely of iron constructions.

In the later years, no significant structural renovations were carried out on the building. Fortunately, the building also suffered minimal damage during wars.

In 1911, the water supply and sewage system was improved and modernised. In November 1919, the bank's building housed the Latvian Provisional Government, which is an interesting and rarely mentioned fact in history. Later, until 1936, the building housed the Ministry of Finance, and from its establishment, it also housed Latvijas Banka (when a new building on Smilšu iela was constructed, the Ministry of Finance relocated there). Until the second half of the 1930s, the building largely retained its original layout, with additions and changes primarily made to the interior.

On 27 March 1940, a gas-proof shelter was put into operation in the basement of the building.



*Transaction hall of Latvijas Banka (1930s, photo by Vilis Rīdzenieks, LV KFFDA)
© Vilis Rīdzenieks
AKKA/LAA, Riga*



*Filling of the safes of Latvijas Banka (1930s, photo by Vilis Rīdzenieks, LV KFFDA)
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What is notable about Latvijas Banka's building?

In the context of city planning history, the decorative finish of the facade of Latvijas Banka's building is a characteristic and culturally significant architectural monument, designated as a nationally protected cultural heritage site. In 1996, the main facade's metalwork and other metal details underwent conservation and restoration.

The construction experts considered the engineering solutions avant-garde for the construction sector of its time – modern heating, ventilation, air conditioning systems as well as full electrification were not commonplace a hundred years ago.

As observed by art historian Vita Banga, Latvijas Banka's building is ornamentally and decoratively more luxurious than other banks in Latvia, particularly standing out with its rich ceiling decoration. Several elements of the bank's interior have become prominent objects in the art history of the first half of the 20th century. From the expert's perspective, cultural heritage objects with historical, scientific, artistic, or other cultural value, whose preservation is in the interest of the Latvian state and people as well as the international community, include:

6 tile stoves, one of which is located in the small assembly hall (Zelm & Boehm, early 20th century); 2 furniture suits (early 20th century and the 1920s); 6 door leaves with wood carvings and stained glass; the table in the bank's transaction hall (early 20th century) and the desk with decorative patterns (1920s); bookcase (1930s); ceramic vase (the second half of the 19th century); 5 lighting fitting sets, including chandeliers and wall sconces (early 20th century); 2 paintings (late 19th century, one by R. Vallier, the other by an unknown artist); 1 painting (1936; by K. Melbārzdīs); stationery set "Mother of Money" (1938; by A. Brašņiņš).

In 2003, at the request of Latvijas Banka, SIA AIG conducted an architecturally artistic inventory of the former cash vault. During the inventory, original and separate objects were documented in four bank rooms, including safes, metal cabinets, ventilation grilles, and radiators that have been preserved from the early 20th century, as well as from the 1920s.

Since Latvijas Banka's operations have resumed, its employees, with the involvement of relevant specialists, have taken care of the building's maintenance. Gradually, it has been renovated and adapted to the needs of a modern central bank while preserving the breath of history and showing due respect to the old walls. It is safe to say that the building will stand for at least another 100 years. In 2005, the doors opened to a wider audience,



*Building of the Riga
Office of the State
Bank of Russia
(1910,
author unknown,
LV KFFDA)*



*View of the Latvian Government building after the fight with the Bermontians
(November 1919, photo by Vilis Rīdzenieks, LV KFFDA)
© Vilis Rīdzenieks AKKA/LAA, Riga*



The information presented here has been sourced from the study commissioned by Latvijas Banka and conducted by historian Maija Āboltiņa in 2004 titled "Latvijas Bankas ēka: celtniecības vēsture" ("Latvijas Banka's Building: Construction History") and its accompanying images, an article by art historian Vita Banga titled "Rīgas banku interjeri" ("Interiors of Banks in Riga") (*Latvijas Arhitektūra*, No 4; 1996) as well as an article by Ēvalds Vēciņš, former consultant to the Governor of Latvijas Banka, titled "Latvijas Bankas dibināšana un darbība (1918–1940)" ("Establishment and Operation of Latvijas Banka (1918–1940)") (*Averss un Reverss* 5/1997). Additional references include a drawing by J. K. Broce from the collection of the Latvian Academic Library, an image from the publication *Rīga und seine Bauten* (1905), and images from the Latvian State Archive of Audiovisual Documents (LV KFFDA).

and in the former vault, the Financial Education and Information Centre "Money World" allowed visitors to explore the secrets of the financial world.

A hundred years ago, Latvijas Banka's building began its life, maintaining its function and representing the stability of the state's financial system right up to the present day.