

BANKING ON NATURE'S POWER AND POETRY

BY HENRY MACLEAN

THE NEW NMB BANK headquarters located southeast of Amsterdam, The Netherlands, is a most unusual corporate facility. Its walls slope, there is no air conditioning in the conventional sense, and the profusion of plants within its sunlit atria receive purified rainwater via multi-million dollar sculptures called flowforms. Yet there is method to its seeming "madness." For this building—the result of a brilliant collaboration of architects, engineers, artists, and clients led by the Amsterdam architecture firm of Alberts and Van Huut—is one of the lowest consumers of energy of any corporate facility in the world. It has also been chosen by the Amsterdam public as one of the most popular buildings to appear in recent years. Little known in the United States, it is being hailed by many in Europe as an inspired harbinger for a more ecologically-sound, more humanistically-balanced future.

As might be expected, even its beginnings were atypical. From the outset, the bank stated that human and environmental concerns were as important

A Dutch design team creates a corporate headquarters that inspires its users even as it respects the Earth.

as economic criteria such as flexibility, efficiency, and low operating costs. Meanwhile, the engineers, landscape designers, and artists on the design team all were invited to contribute their ideas from the start, rather than being called upon, as is customary, after the architects and clients had settled upon a scheme. What's more, all the participants in the design process were encouraged to stray into one another's areas of specialization in order to encourage a more holistic integration of design factors. The result is an extraordinarily expressive building shaped by a remarkable synthesis of aesthetic, social,

within the bank, while offering relatively intimate working quarters for twenty to forty employees on each floor. At the same time, from an engineering vantage point, the sectionalized massing of the towers, plus the sloping walls, help to deflect traffic noise from the busy intersection on which the bank is situated, while also significantly reducing the impact of wind, thereby cutting heat loss. Meanwhile, the structural repetition from tower to tower contributed to the building being able to be constructed of precast elements, providing a great cost savings, while swinging the towers into its curved configuration provides a stimulating aesthetic experience, visually and kinetically, as one moves through the facility.

While the towers distinguish organizational entities within the bank, a bright and lively interior street offers a strong sense of community by connecting the towers and by opening up to all levels at each of the sunlit atria. Along the way, the street winds past all the building's general services, including reception, the library, the auditorium, the conference rooms, four restaurants, and some small shops, between which are frequent views of the gardens outside.

Breaking down the separation between indoors and outdoors was another key goal of the bank and its designers, as evidenced by the \$2.8 million budget committed to the gardens alone, out of a total building budget of \$147 million. At ground level, the decks of the parking levels are covered with a variety of soils and vegetation. Indoors, the atria are filled with abundantly verdant precast planters which serve double duty by offering natural beauty at the same time that they provide comfortable levels of humidity for the building.

The plants in the atria receive purified rainwater via elaborate sculptures known as flowforms, developed by John Wilkes in research conducted over the past twenty years and realized for this project by Peter Rawstorne. Not merely art works, these flowforms achieve purification of the water through "choreographed" patterns of movement of the water itself. By utilizing this pioneering process, the bank and its designers have not

economic, and scientific principles.

The unusual massing of the building, for example, appears quixotic, yet is, in fact, the outcome of a complex dialogue among the different members of the design team. As can be seen from the plan and section, this 538,000 square foot headquarters (plus 300,000 square feet of parking) for 2500 employees consists of a series of ten towers, varying in height from three to six stories, and strung together in an 'S' shape. From a sociological point of view, the towers, the void of each of which is dominated by a different color of the rainbow, provide distinct identities for different departments

Flowform purifying rainwater at the same time that it treats passersby to lively water sculpture.