

**ARCHITECTURE ON MODERN EUROPEAN BANKNOTES: IN SEARCH OF  
STABILITY THROUGH ABSTRACT CIRCULATION**

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## **Architecture on Modern European Banknotes: In Search of Stability through Abstract Circulation**

### Abstract

This essay strictly engages with the cultural development of the Euro banknotes of the 1996 *First* series to demystify the global cultural impact that currency imagery holds as it considers the following: (1) how imagery of the winning 1996 currency design proposal facilitates the movement of architectural awareness; and (2) how elements of society and an imagined community contribute to the construction of European identity in the context of global and national instabilities throughout the recent decades. It is only after these topics have been critically interrogated that we can surmise whether or not the circulation of abstractions (de)motivates stability of both architectural pedagogy and European national identity.

### **Introduction**

The impact of European bank note imagery on the greater culture of Europe shifted with the 1996 Euro Banknote Design Exhibition hosted by the European Central Bank. This design competition introduced an era of architectural-focused imagery to the European Union's currency which incites an investigation of how an imagined community is cultivated through the predominant imagery represented on the Euro banknotes, including other mediums as technology and culture evolves. There was a degree of skepticism that arose when paper money was introduced in the early nineteenth century due to its unfamiliarity as a vehicle of monetary value.<sup>1</sup> It was only after the 1850s that Europeans grew to accept its legitimacy, where notions of trust was developed by "virtue of its appearance as a product of [mass] mechanical reproduction."<sup>2</sup> Thus the normalization of paper currency requires the continuous act of a collective faith of an imagined community to fulfil its economic function.<sup>3</sup> Despite the growing ubiquitous use of Euro banknotes, banknote designers are confronted with the responsibility to align its visual motifs and iconography with specific yet broad national identities that continue to change over time, especially with the globalization and establishment of Europe in a global context.<sup>4</sup> This challenge was undertaken by the European Monetary Institute (EMI) who launched a call for proposals in February 1996 to redesign

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<sup>1</sup> Frances Robertson, "The Aesthetics of Authenticity: Printed Banknotes as Industrial Currency," *Technology and Culture* 46, no. 1 (2005): 34.

<sup>2</sup> Frances Robertson, "The Aesthetics of Authenticity: Printed Banknotes as Industrial Currency," 31.

<sup>3</sup> Monica Sassatelli, "Europe in Your Pocket: Narratives of Identity in Euro Iconography," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 25, no. 3 (2017): 355-356.

<sup>4</sup> Sorensen, Anders Ravn. "Too Weird for Banknotes': Legitimacy and Identity in the Production of Danish Banknotes 1947-2007." *Journal of Historical Sociology* 29, no. 2 (2016): 183.

Euro banknotes with the design requirement of excluding imagery that explicitly associates itself with a particular European country; such as portraits of national heroes or famous artists (or influential persons in general), as well as existing national landmarks.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, EMI was searching for stability in global presence through abstraction as designers were tasked to produce a design that is both intelligible and widely acceptable to Europeans. However, the limitation of abstraction prevented designers from using actual existing architectural landmarks in their proposals. As a result, abstract architecture imagery spearheaded the narratives of European identity when the design competition concluded in December 1996.<sup>6</sup> Robert Kalina's winning design boasts a legacy of European architectural styles that are vaguely reminiscent of particular landmarks, but not specifically the product of an identifiable architect, inciting mixed criticisms from academics, designers, and communities at a global scale.<sup>7</sup> As such, this investigation strictly engages with the cultural development of the Euro banknotes of the 1996 *First* series, and critically analyzes the cultural impact that currency imagery holds, as it considers the following: (1) how imagery of the winning 1996 currency design proposal facilitates the movement of architectural awareness—drawing inspiration from both Michael Guggenheim and Ola Soderstrom and their interpretations of how different forms of mobilities influence the built environment and interpersonal culture; and (2) what elements of society contribute to the construction of European identity in the context of global and national instabilities experienced in antiquity and throughout the recent decades. It is only after these topics have been critically interrogated that we can surmise whether or not the circulation of abstractions (de)motivates stability of both architectural pedagogy and European national identity.

### **Circulation of Paper Bills and the Movement of Architecture**

Printmaking introduced a new style of technical illustration whose objectivity is asserted by its universal geometric line drawings. Printed images on currency (or currency imagery) reinforces this subliminal familiarity to establish newfound ways to consume art, along with its symbolism (or lack thereof), in the age of mechanical reproduction.<sup>8</sup> Guggenheim and Soderstrom argues that buildings and

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<sup>5</sup> Monica Sassatelli, "Europe in Your Pocket": Narratives of Identity in Euro Iconography," 357.

<sup>6</sup> Monica Sassatelli, 358.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Pawley, "The Design of the Euro Banknotes Does No Favours to Architecture," *Architects' Journal (London)* 214, no. 8 (2001): 22.

<sup>8</sup> Frances Robertson, 50.

urban forms are constituted and shaped by different manifestations of mobility that is fueled by five main circulating entities: namely capital, people, ideas, images, and the rise of global architectural/design offices.<sup>9</sup> As the usage and exchange of paper bills between average citizens become commonplace by the mid-nineteenth century, so too does the normalization of the migration of ideas and symbolism that came with its printed images. Thus, a common strategy that many governments have used in the design of their currencies is to implement nationalist imagery based upon their respective nationalist past and contemporary culture in an effort to forge a collective identity, thus strengthening ties among their own citizens.<sup>10</sup> However, the design of Euro banknotes, specifically of the *First* series, deviates from the norm due to its complete lack of human figures and heritage landmarks; showing, instead, *abstracted* doors and windows on the front-side [[see figure 1](#)], and abstracted bridges on the back-side [[see figure 3](#)].<sup>11</sup> And “for many, these [virtually abstracted] images seem to reflect the virtuality of Europe as a community or union.”<sup>12</sup>

The choice to represent the unity of Europe through abstract architecture was a recurring subject of debate between the EMI councilmembers. Ultimately on December 1996, the EMI Council has chosen Robert Kalina’s proposal as the winning design for the modern Euro banknote, based on advice given by a jury of experts and the results collected from EU-wide public surveys.<sup>13</sup> The winning entry represent “architectural **styles** [or **types**] of seven periods in Europe’s cultural history: Classical (€5), Romanesque (€10), Gothic (€20), Renaissance (€50), Baroque and Rococo (€100), the age of Iron and Glass architecture (€200), and twentieth-century [Modern] architecture (€500)” [emphasis mine.]<sup>14</sup> The usage of distinctly European architectural styles from antiquity reignites Kenneth Frampton’s debate between typology and topography where he argues that *regionalism* does not go hand-in-hand with *building type*: where, on one hand, a building type presumes transportability; and on the other hand, topography represents a placeness that is or has adapted to local climatic, ecological, or symbolic circumstances.<sup>15</sup> Guggenheim and Soderstrom further elaborates upon this concept by stating that:

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Guggenheim, and Ola Söderström, “Mobility and the Transformation of Built Form,” in *Re-Shaping Cities: How Global Mobility Transforms Architecture and Urban Form*, ed. by Michael Guggenheim and Ola Söderström, (London: Routledge, 2010), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Anat First, and Na’ama Sheffi, “Borders and Banknotes: The National Perspective,” *Nations and Nationalism* 21, no. 2 (2015): 335.

<sup>11</sup> Monica Sassatelli, 356-357.

<sup>12</sup> Monica Sassatelli, 356-357.

<sup>13</sup> Monica Sassatelli, 358.

<sup>14</sup> Monica Sassatelli, 358.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Guggenheim, and Ola Söderström, “Mobility and the Transformation of Built Form,” 5.

“a building **type** is formed by detaching given features from existing, locally rooted buildings and condensing them into a non-local type [where] formal features are identified and related to specific functions. The history of building types can then be written as a history of very specific local circumstances that give rise to new building types that are **abstracted** and reduced to a description of essential features, to make them **reproducible**” [emphasis mine.]<sup>16</sup>

In this instance, EMI’s decision to incorporate abstracted building types on their banknotes allow for architecture to thrive as a living legacy; fueled further by the industrial process of printmaking that is rooted in mass production and consumption.<sup>17</sup> However, it is for the same reason that the *First* series’ is criticized due to its lack of *placeness*—offered by monuments such as Reichstag, Arc-de-Triomphe, or Pompidou Centre—that results in a *dull* and *soulless* vision of the future [see [figure 5](#) and [figure 6](#).]<sup>18</sup>

As a counter-argument, the European Central Bank (ECB) has codified Kalina’s design and publicly declared that “windows and doors represent the European spirit of openness, whereas bridges symbolise the close cooperation and communication between peoples, Europe, and the rest of the world.”<sup>19</sup>

The winning *First* series design of 1996 represents an obsession with typology with blatant disregard to topography (as described by Frampton) where abstract architecture challenges local heterogeneous constituency that continues to evolve over time. But what ECB’s public announcement also achieves is that it acknowledges the presence of an international audience, where paper currency acts as the medium (or *sign*) in which a national identity can be perceived in a global scale.<sup>20</sup> And through both visual and linguistic rhetoric, the ECB not only strove to define something thoroughly European, but they also aimed to define a *universal* subject through architectural abstraction where currency imagery visualises narratives of collective identities.<sup>21</sup>

### **(De)stabilizing Cultural Identity**

Prior to the invention of paper currency (and the age of nationalism), kings and emperors have achieved and maintained political power by etching their portraits onto the minted coins they have produced in antiquity. Similarly, the rise of nation-states is marked by the invention of national banknotes

<sup>16</sup> Michael Guggenheim, and Ola Söderström, 5-6.

<sup>17</sup> Frances Robertson, 35.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Pawley, “The Design of the Euro Banknotes Does No Favours to Architecture,” 22.

<sup>19</sup> Monica Sassatelli, 358.

<sup>20</sup> Sorensen, Anders Ravn. “Too Weird for Banknotes’,” 189.

<sup>21</sup> Monica Sassatelli, 362.

where many politicians of the early nineteenth century have regarded this new form of currency as the vehicle that cultivates national identities and imagined communities.<sup>22</sup> The images that appear on paper currency represent a level of preservation that are indeed expressions of spatial power (both political and social) relations that establishes collective identities and maintain citizenship.<sup>23</sup> By late nineteenth century, similar products of mass-production such as flags and postage stamps have been systematically organized by governments to maintain this national imagination that stems from their “desire to foster legitimacy in light of the domestic challenges faced by [their respective] rulers.”<sup>24</sup> What makes paper currency and imagery efficient intellectual technologies is because of their ability to preserve a representation of a realised or potential building across space and time, along with the memories and ideologies that can be extracted from it.<sup>25</sup> All the while, the sites, landscapes, buildings, and figureheads that appear on national banknotes (including coins or postage stamps) reveals a construction process of a territorial identity which demonstrate a residual mix of old and new cultural content.<sup>26</sup> In fact, the very “embellishment of banknotes with portraits of great scientists, artists, writers, and musicians [...] still make a massive contribution to the gross national product of [a] country, and thus help formulate the world’s idea of [a recognized] national world.”<sup>27</sup> Martin Pawley argues that an image of Michelangelo, for example, on a 500 Euro banknote may entice international jealousy but would certainly not have suggested national poverty.<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, imagery and symbolism found on banknotes become the means of banal nationalism as it represent the limits of a nation-state’s sovereign border and placeness within an increasingly globalizing world.<sup>29</sup>

In general, banknotes operate as national symbols that both maintain nation-state borders while serving as popular national sites of memory. With increasing globalisation and circulation, Euro banknotes are subjected to intense user-interaction and exposure of printed cultural imagery.<sup>30</sup> A US Treasury Chief Executive in 1863 identifies two main points that explains why currency imagery is crucial to nation-building. Firstly, imagery found on banknotes is vital to convey nationalist propaganda to poor

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<sup>22</sup> Anat First, and Na’ama Sheffi, “Borders and Banknotes: The National Perspective,” 334.

<sup>23</sup> Anat First, and Na’ama Sheffi, 332.

<sup>24</sup> Anat First, and Na’ama Sheffi, 334.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Guggenheim, and Ola Söderström, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Anat First, and Na’ama Sheffi, 330.

<sup>27</sup> Martin Pawley, 22.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Pawley, 22.

<sup>29</sup> Anat First, and Na’ama Sheffi, 330.

<sup>30</sup> Anat First, and Na’ama Sheffi, 332.

and illiterate citizens. And secondly, its mundaneness “supplies a constant reminder of the common denominator that binds citizens together.”<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, Anat and Sheffi considers the *First* series as “clear evidence of the banknote as a medium that either represents national culture or deliberately blurs it”<sup>32</sup> by virtue of its abstraction. Each of the notes’ seven denominations are identified by a predominant colour scheme [see [figure 2](#) and [figure 4](#)] that is paired with hybrid and fictional structures that do not belong to any European country.<sup>33</sup> In a roundabout way, the *First* series’ design is successful due to its concern towards shifting notions of Europe and collective identities,<sup>34</sup> whose cultural foundation is a patchwork of languages and cultures defined by works of art, music, and architecture during times of grief and war.<sup>35</sup>

At its core, however, the normalized trade of paper currency depends upon an unholy alliance between authenticity and technical reproducibility where public acceptance of its monetary and national value requires a continuous act of collective faith.<sup>36</sup> And “a nation's currency—embodied by the design of the notes and coins [that citizens carry within their] pockets and purses—is possibly the most immediate, tangible expression of [their] culture, history, and identity.”<sup>37</sup> Beyond the realm of paper currency, however, one will find that some contemporary artists have taken the liberty to bring these fictional abstractions into reality by transforming its doors and windows into consumable sugar sculptures [see [figure 7](#)], and its bridges into tangible road networks [see [figure 8](#) and [figure 9](#).]

### **Conclusion: (De)Stability in Abstractions**

The era of architectural-focused imagery on Europe’s currency presented a shift in their cultural identity that promoted an emphasis on architectural images rather than the traditional figurehead found on most paper currency systems worldwide. Despite its abstractions, the imagery of the winning proposal—and the now actively circulating currency—has the power to represent a specific belief from a specific period by virtue of its visual semblances; and the beauty behind these Euro banknotes will be immortalized as it recalls the narrative of history as an architectural process. In fact, conflicting and mixed public interpretations of the architecture found on modern Euro banknotes further energizes the

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<sup>31</sup> Anat First, and Na’ama Sheffi, 335.

<sup>32</sup> Anat First, and Na’ama Sheffi, 331.

<sup>33</sup> Todd Pruzan, “The Almighty Euro.(design of the European Union’s New Currency),” *Print (New York)* 53, no. 2 (1999): 140.

<sup>34</sup> Monica Sassatelli, 354.

<sup>35</sup> Todd Pruzan, “The Almighty Euro.(design of the European Union’s New Currency),” 138.

<sup>36</sup> Frances Robertson, 49.

<sup>37</sup> Todd Pruzan, 138.

contested narratives of European identity that continues to grow complex forevermore.<sup>38</sup> Regardless, the shift in what and who constructs European identity will continue to persist as technology and the globalization of society evolve over time. Banknotes wield the ability to circulate both architectural awareness and national identity, but efforts towards cultural representation are reprioritized with the rise of new technologies, digital currency, and wireless e-transfers. Perhaps this can be seen as a blessing for banknote designers from not only Europe but also the rest of the world; for they are emancipated from the complexities involved in representing an ever-so changing national identity.

Banknotes are not the only vehicle that cultivates national identity and one will find that the mobility of architecture—along with its attached symbolism and ideas—is transformed into different mediums as humanity continues to experience a shift from paper currency to a world of electronic payments mediated through private corporations and their respective brand identities [[see figure 10.](#)] Modern technologies of the twenty-first century democratized the process of culture-creation where global citizens now look towards private corporation rather than government-mandated representations of culture. The hegemonic nature of contactless and digital methods of payment over the past decade rapidly escalated due to the emergence of the global Covid pandemic since early 2020; moving towards a trend of a cashless society where governments and imagined communities render themselves visible not through the medium of paper bills, but rather the medium of e-commerce in its place. And now is an ever-so critical moment to consider how private entities and their brand identities—such as Mastercard, Google Pay, and VISA—is the new currency imagery that shapes national identities. Ultimately, the social prominence of architecture—whether it be through abstractions or literal representations—will resurface despite the upsurge of non-physical currencies; where European and global identities shall be shaped by whichever medium of currency circulation dominates the global landscape.

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<sup>38</sup> Monica Sassatelli, 364.



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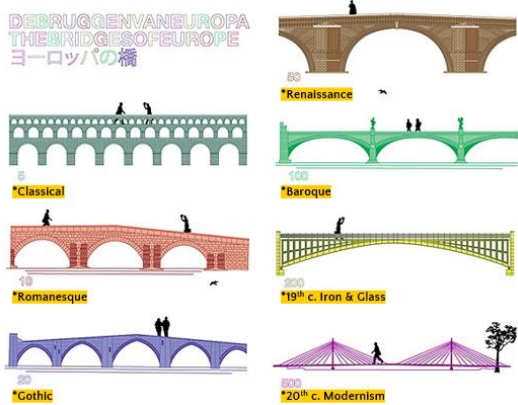
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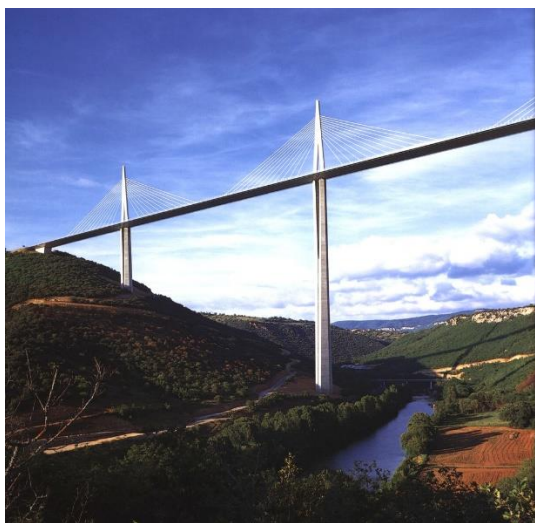
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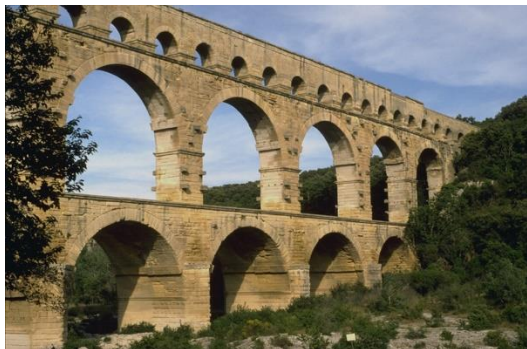
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