

Forced off course by world events, a showcase building by renowned Belgian modernist Henry van de Velde secured a permanent address in the United States 66 years ago. We trace its course through war and peace, colonialism and the struggle for Civil Rights

Bells appealing



Postcard view of the Belgian pavilion at the New York World's Fair in 1939

A leading pioneer of Art Nouveau and international modernism, Henry van de Velde (1863-1957), the polyvalent Belgian artist, designer, architect and founder of Brussels' La Cambre art school, was an obvious choice to design the Belgian pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair. He was widely known, well respected and had carried out the same assignment with distinction for the Paris World's Fair held two years earlier. His building at that exposition was notable not only for its unconventional modern design but for the fact that it was completed on schedule at a time when the Great Depression was at its worst in France. Some of the

Fair's national pavilions were never finished at all.

For the New York project, van de Velde, then 76, worked with two colleagues from La Cambre, the architects Victor Bourgeois and Léon Stynen. They adopted a blocky, horizontal format, like the one which van de Velde had created in Paris, and used similar 80-by-60-centimetre terracotta plaques to face much of the facade. Unique to the New York pavilion were two massive sandstone bas-relief friezes representing 'Belgians at Work' and Africans of the Belgian Congo. Sculptor Oscar Jespers, another of van de Velde's associates from La Cambre, collaborated with Henri Puvrez on the workers' scene, and Arthur Dupagne, a specialist in Congolese subjects, produced the one representing the Belgian Congo. Measuring nearly 4 by 12 metres each, the friezes are said to be the largest ceramic bas-reliefs known to have been created since *The Archers*, the fabled decorative panels at the Palace of Darius in Susa, which are dated circa 500 BC.

Slavery and the Occupation

Even without comparison to the ancients, the 20th-century relief carvings on the van de Velde building are impressive. So must have been the sight and sounds of the 18.5-metre-tall belfry that was part of the New York pavilion complex. The tower was sheathed in grey slate and equipped with a 35-bell carillon that periodically rang out folksongs and the Belgian national anthem.



The transplanted pavilion and bell tower as they look today, on the campus of Virginia Union University in Richmond, Virginia

The main attractions inside the pavilion were galleries devoted to industry, arts and crafts and the Belgian Congo. The building also housed a hall of honour, atrium, terrace restaurant and cinema. Prefabricated in Belgium, the three-part structure was intended to be dismantled, repatriated and reassembled for use as a school when the Fair closed. But the timing was terrible: Germany invaded Belgium in May 1940. When the World's Fair ended that October, the Belgian government, exiled in London, offered the pavilion and its bell tower to the US.

A year later, the orphaned complex was awarded to Virginia Union University (VUU), a private, all-Black college in Richmond, Virginia's state capital. Founded in 1865 at the end of the Civil War, the university began as a school for freed slaves in a facility that had recently served as a slave-trader's holding pen. In a mind-boggling acceptance speech delivered in 1941, the governor of Virginia said:

The gift reminds us of the friendship and sympathy which have existed between the Belgian people and the people of the United States since 1914 and also symbolises a

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desire on the part of the Belgian government to express its appreciation to the Negro race for the part it has played in making Belgium a colonial power. It provides continuing evidence of the historic fact that Belgium during its 100 years of existence as an independent nation has been thrice invaded and enslaved but each time has broken its bonds to start anew with courage and determination to live its appointed democratic life. It is ...a lesson worth the study of all races and nations that Belgium, divided as she is in religion, in language and in politics, can achieve unity in the face of disaster and can think generous thoughts and perform generous acts even while she is subject to cruel oppression.

Dianne Watkins, a VUU alumna and organiser of a current campaign to restore the van de Velde building, describes the import of the gift more directly: “To see this building coming to a Black college during segregation was a miracle.”

Strapped for cash but with a sponsoring committee headed by Eleanor Roosevelt, VUU raised \$500,000 to ship the pavilion South. Under the supervision of Hugo van Kuyck (1902-1975), one of the principal architects of Brussels’ Tour de Finances, the three sections of van de Velde’s building were reassembled and joined in a U-shape. The pavilion’s gallery of industry was transformed into a library; the colonial gallery was converted into a science centre; and the hall of honour was reborn as a basketball court.

The paint had hardly dried inside the 20,000-square-foot, newly purposed complex when it was requisitioned by the US War Department as an induction site for military conscripts. From 1943 to 1947, 161,000 draftees, one-quarter of whom were selected for military service, passed through the Belgian Friendship Building, as the listed landmark is now known.

Bells for a belfry

Before leaving the Fair grounds in New York, the belfry was stripped of its carillon, which was presented to Herbert Hoover in gratitude for the humanitarian relief effort he had organised for Belgium during World War One. (Hoover, in turn, gave the carillon to the political think tank that bears his name, in Palo Alto, California.) Standing tall on VUU’s campus, the empty tower continues to function as a silent sign and symbol of the university. Sadly, at some point, a well-meaning local supplier

replaced the structure’s slate facing with aluminium-siding, free of charge.

Except for that isolated ‘improvement’, no major modification has been made to the Belgian Friendship Building since it opened at the university in 1942. But extensive restoration is needed: the Jespers frieze, for example, shows visible signs of deterioration. Watkins’ fund-raising drive (www.bellsforpeace.org) is giving priority to restoring a carillon to the belfry. Thus far, money is in hand to buy and install four bells. The Belgian government has pledged funds for a further four. That leaves VUU 15 bells short of the 23 needed to produce a full-throated, \$1.5 million peal. In imitation of the original carillon now at the Hoover Institution, the largest of the new bells, the bourdon, will be inscribed with the Latin *Una pro pace sono* (For peace alone do I ring): thus the campaign’s title.

Belgo-American ties

What Henry van de Velde might have thought of all this is anyone’s guess. Like his World’s Fair pavilion, he too was exiled by the war, but not before it was over. During the Occupation, he remained active in his post as advisor to the Ministry of Public Works in Brussels. It was a bad decision. He was accused of collaboration, and although he was not convicted, the experience left him a ruined man. He fled to Zurich, where he lived on charity and died at 94.

Constructed in Leuven between 1936 and 1942, van de Velde’s final building in Belgium recalls his Belgian Friendship Building in its scale and materials. It was designed as a school and served as such until 1990. Abandoned and threatened with demolition, it was restored and extensively transformed by Belgian architect Georges Baines to house the municipal library and archives, which opened in 2001. For anyone unable to make a site visit to Virginia, the next best way to get a first-hand impression of the Belgian Friendship Building is to see its homologue, the so-called Tweebronnen building, in Leuven.

And while in Leuven, give a thought to American architects Warren and Whetmore, best known as the designers of Grand Central Station but not to be forgotten as the creators of Leuven’s other city library, built between 1921 and 1928 in Flemish neo-Renaissance-style. It was presented as a gift from US colleges and universities, to replace Leuven’s university library, destroyed during World War One. Cruelly, the ‘new’ building was badly damaged at the beginning of World War Two, but it survives to this day, along with its carillon.

These loosely entwined threads of history take on added significance during this 50th-anniversary year of Brussels’ Expo 58. That was the first World’s Fair to follow the war that marooned van de Velde’s pavilion on foreign soil, giving the US its only example of his architecture. The motto of the 1939 Fair in New York for which it was built was ‘The World of Tomorrow’; and while the Cold War raged, Expo ’58 proclaimed ‘A New Humanism’. Bells for peace never go out of fashion.



Half of Arthur Dupagne’s monumental stone frieze portraying people of the Congo