

# Never say Never. About the Restoration of Henry van de Velde's Booktower.

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The slides of this paper can be found at: [http://www.zhbluzern.ch/LIBER-LAG/PP\\_LAG\\_06/Thursday/Peteghem\\_GentUB.pdf](http://www.zhbluzern.ch/LIBER-LAG/PP_LAG_06/Thursday/Peteghem_GentUB.pdf)

## ABSTRACT

The role of the central library within the university of Ghent (27.000 students) is fourfold: it is the centre of the library's network and its reorganisation, trying to get the current number (> 300) of libraries down. It is the digital library in all its aspects, it is the repository library for cultural heritage and "passive" collections and it offers a working place in its wonderful book tower of Henry van de Velde.

The story of the book tower starts in the 1930s when Henry van de Velde was asked to build a University Library and offices for the department of Art history. His tower-idea was not exactly what the chief librarian had in mind, so he had to (net)work hard to get the building he wanted. It was finished on the verge of the second world war. The concrete building has a height of 64 meter, has 24 floors and a "belvedere" and houses almost 3 million books in closed racks.

The university did not neglect the tower during all these years, but was not always aware of the historical value and often choose the cheapest way for building matters. A couple of years ago a private person bought the Van de Velde archive of the book tower (which was in private hands), got fascinated with the building, got angry because of lack of care and networked (maybe as hard as Van de Velde once did to get it built) to get it restored. The board of directors of the university said yes to the restoration (estimated on 41 million Euro) in September 2005.

## INTRODUCTION

Let me start with a confession. At the LIBER Architecture conference in Venice and Bolzano in March 2004 I felt quite unhappy and also a bit jealous after listening to all the reports on new library buildings and nice refurbishments. I knew that my own library is a hidden jewel in need of special care and attention and alas a lot of money ... Thinking of that conference I'm even surprised that here and now I can tell you a story, and indeed it is more a story than a historical report, on the planned restoration of Van de Velde's famous Book tower, which is today a fact. How come, you will ask. Before I tell you, I would like to stress that this is not a fairytale but a result of awareness, networking and visibility and to make things work you need of course a building that is worth fighting for.

In 1933 the 70-year-old Henry van de Velde was asked to design the new university library and the institutes for art history, veterinary science and pharmaceutical science. From the very start, Van de Velde had tower book storage in mind. It wasn't easy because the librarians did not think much of his project and even commissioned his colleague Armand Cerulus to make plans for a longitudinal alternative. However, Van de Velde stubbornly held on to his tower vision and he got it. His final version became a concrete Book tower, a construction 64 metres high with four basements, twenty floors and an impressive belvedere. The choice for concrete was an expression of modernity, and was accentuated by the innovative technique (in Belgium) of sliding shuttering. Henry Van de Velde, the aesthetic, opted for an unusual façade of bare concrete on a plinth with bluestone cladding. He gave the tower the shape of a Greek cross, not as a religious symbol but to symbolise the connection between heaven and earth, the merger of time and space. The pond in the inner court reflects the tower's basic pattern. For Van de Velde the continuity of the line was particularly important. The incidence of light had an effect on the location of the reading rooms: the big reading room and the journal reading room receive a lot of zenital light and face south, the manuscript reading room faces north to shield it from too much damaging light.

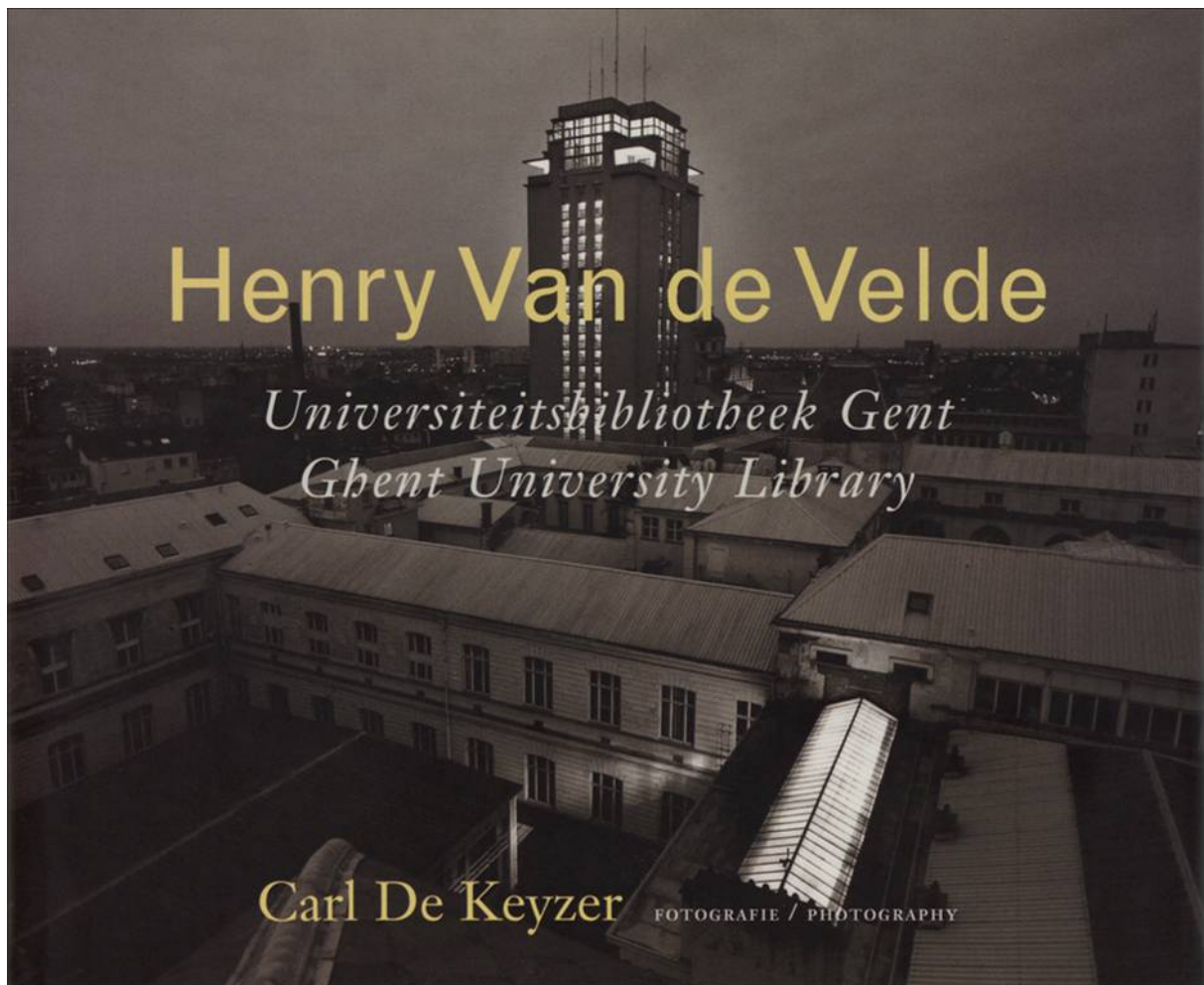
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Being the artist he was, Van de Velde drew all the details: black iron window profiles, floor patterns, door handles, furniture, radiator cladding. The difficult economic situation and the outbreak of World War II stood in the way of the completion of his big project: he had to change the material (e.g. marble instead of rubber or linoleum for the floor covering), and not all the furniture was made. From the start the building functioned as the central library of a set of hundreds of small departmental libraries scattered all over the city.

## **AWARENESS**

The tower was designated a protected monument on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1992 thanks to the inspiring work of vzw Interbellum.[1] Alas it didn't mean that it was treated as protected heritage since then. Living in a building day by day makes you rather blind for what's going wrong with it and you almost need an external critical eye to see it. We were lucky to have more than one.

In 1997 the Magnum photographer [Carl de Keyzer](#) made a photo book on the library.



*Carl de Keyzer, photobook on the library*

Although a wonderful black and white portrait of the building and the people working in it, not everyone was pleased with it, because it showed a lot of painful details and worn out places. Nevertheless I was astonished when a Dutch friend's reaction to the book was 'very nice these reproductions from the fifties'. Reproductions of the fifties? Then I knew something was really wrong. Looking better at the pictures helped to change bit by bit leftovers from earlier decisions whatever they were meant for, but money for real refurbishments and restoration was not available. Nothing could or would happen to the building and that was it.



*Whatever the door was meant for ... © Carl de Keyzer*

This is maybe inexplicable from the viewpoint of the Van de Velde building but understandable from the viewpoint of the university. To understand this it is necessary to know the structure and the responsibilities of the institution.

[Ghent University](http://www.ghentuniversity.be) has more than 28.000 students and 6.200 personnel of which 2.500 researchers. The university offers high-quality, research-based education in all academic disciplines and has 11 faculties. Each faculty is governed by a dean. The central administration is divided in 8 departments. One of these is the department of research affairs and the university library is one of its offices besides the research coordination office and the technology transfer office.

The management team of the university is composed of the vice-chancellor, the deputy vice-chancellor, the chief academic administrator, the chief logistics administrator and the secretary of the board of governors. Vice-chancellor and deputy vice-chancellor are elected each four years by the members of the faculty boards. So, if we keep in mind that the voting public belongs to the faculties and not to the central administration and that the mission of the university is research and education in the first place, then it is clear that research and student places are the environments where the university will invest in buildings.

Does this mean that the Book tower would be neglected? Not at all, no extra money would be made available for many years because it was not calculated into the building and investment plans but whatever was asked to be mended was mended as long as it could fit in. The only mistake that was made for decades was the not recognising of the uniqueness of the building. All repairs were done in the cheapest and most decent possible way, which is to say as a normal average university building would have been treated. Fortunately no big changes were made. Thanks to this the 'save modernism' database of the St Lucas-archive in Brussels can describe the Book tower as unique in international architectural standards, authentic but worn-out. *Authentic* is the word I like most in this description, because it means that nothing is lost yet.

I started my story with the importance of awareness, networking and visibility. So far I only talked about the awareness of the structures and the position of the library building in the institution. To get real change we needed more external critical eyes and what first looked as a nightmare would become a kind of fairytale.

## **NETWORKING**

September 2002 was a very dark month. Due to a cut down in the finances of the central administration, the library had to give in a huge amount of its current budget. With bills to big deals to pay, this was a disaster, which was not solved overnight. As if it was meant to be, the architect's archives of the Book tower, which were in private hands, were sold publicly on the 26<sup>th</sup> of October at Henry Godts in Brussels. Since we didn't have the money we tried to convince a foundation of public benefit to buy the archive in order to keep it in Belgium, but we even didn't get an answer to our request. So the archive was sold to a private person, who wanted to stay anonymous, for 25.000 euro.

Library life went on. Months later, on Friday the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2003 the Flemish progressive newspaper *De Morgen* published a special quire on tower buildings, asking prominent people what their favourite skyscrapers were. Two ministers, the Antwerp alderman for culture and the "Flemish Architect" mentioned the Book tower as their first or second favourite.

Around this period Belgium published a series of stamps on Van de Velde, one of them being the Book tower.[2] Which was a pure coincidence. Shortly after the publication of the skyscraper-article the cabinet of the alderman for mobility of the city of Ghent asked if they could present their newest mobility plan to the minister of urban planning (who was one of the two ministers who choose the Van de Velde building) in the library. Still proud of being mentioned we said yes, of course.

A few days later, we got the question if Mister Andre Singer could visit the tower. Hesitating a bit, because it was a busy period, the request was strengthened by the fact that Mister Singer was the person who bought the Van de Velde archive and that after knowing the building on paper he would like to visit it. The appointment was settled on Monday the 14<sup>th</sup> of April 2003. Mister Singer was late. Or that was what I thought. In fact he entered the library, was amazed by seeing the state of the building and left. But returned fortunately! We spent hours in visiting and revisiting the building. I will always remember the embarrassment when walking in a basement with the dust particles whirling up in an early spring sunshine and getting the question if the library had a dust free, sun free, acclimatized place to keep their archives. Not only the dust was the problem but also the knowledge that one of the critical points of the building is the climate and realising that being the treasurer of such a huge cultural heritage collection we are not able to safeguard this collection in the best possible way. It was an extremely painful moment especially when Andre Singer afterwards told us that if it had been there, the Book tower would have been his favourite place to deposit the archive he had bought. Meanwhile, the original archive is deposited at the Royal Academy in Brussels and a digital copy is available in the Book tower.

After talking for hours André Singer asked an appointment with the vice-chancellor of the university. To tell him how important the building is. The vice-chancellor accepted and this was the start of a slow and broad networking of people being responsible for the university, for culture, for architecture, for the city, for the province, for the state ...



*The vice chancellor, the mayor, the minister ... © Ingrid Decraeye*

Before these meetings could take place André Singer wanted a document in which was listed what had to be restored and how much it would cost. He ordered (and paid) a [private study](#), which was made public after presenting it to the board of governors on the 13<sup>th</sup> and a broader research and administrative audience on the 20<sup>th</sup> of November 2003. In his presentations André Singer showed 12 portraits of Van de Velde made by amongst others Léon Abry, Theo Van Rysselberghe, Constantin Meunier, Edvard Munch. His question was to look for another Belgian who was not a king or queen and who was portrayed as often as Van de Velde by renowned artists. The audience was surprised. Then he showed wonderful black and white pictures from the fifties of a glorious building in all its beauty. Now the audience was proud. He finished with pictures without any comment of things that went wrong for many years and the warning that if we continued like this, in seven years time there would be a point of no return, because all money would be spent and wrong decisions would have been made. The audience was embarrassed. But the message was clear: if anything has to be done, please keep your hands off and work on a master plan and look for the budget to do it right.

## **VISIBILITY**

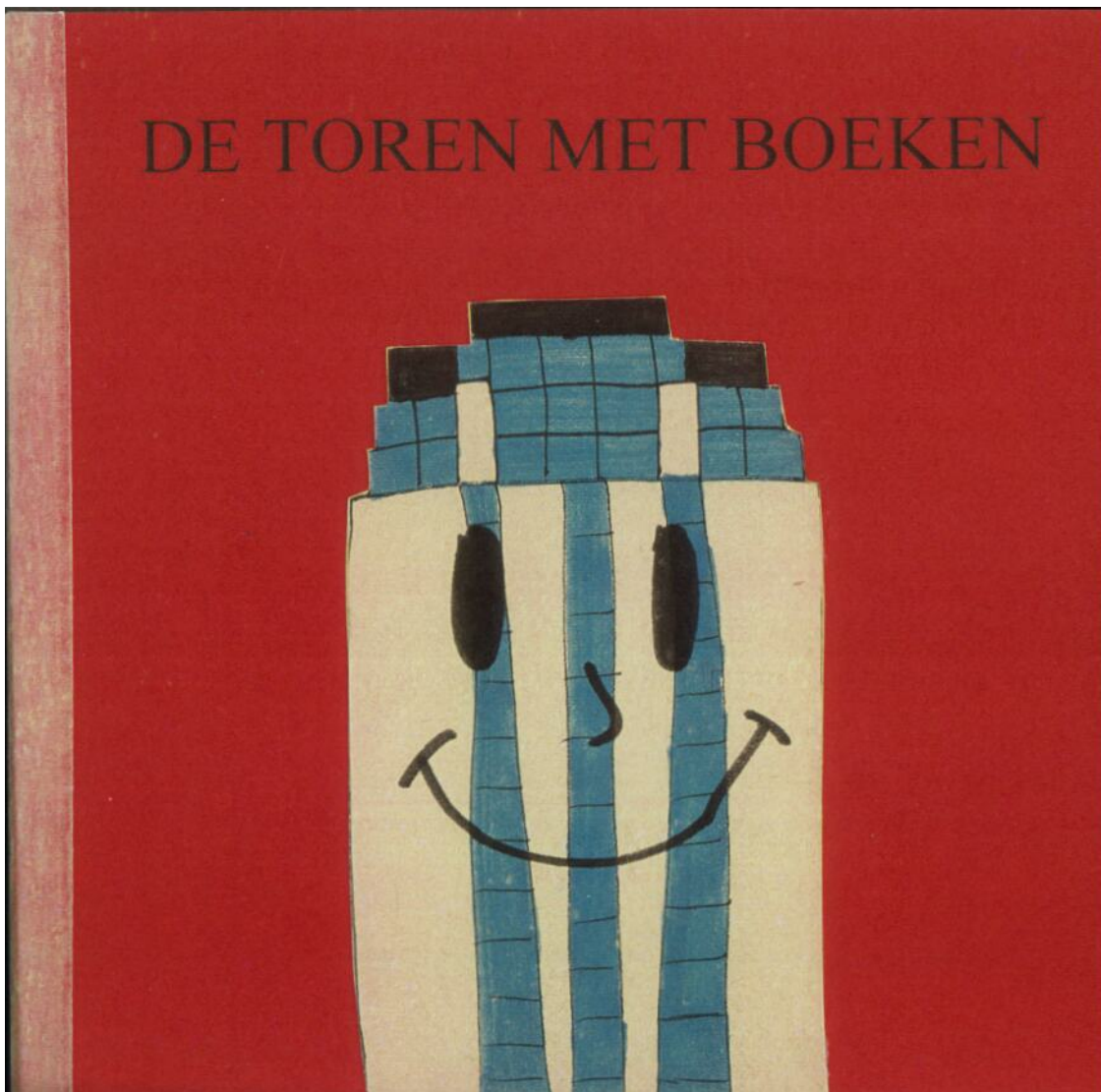
Two Flemish leading newspapers gave the publication a scope on the first or a full page of the week-end edition.[3] TerZake, the daily news program on *Canvas* (the more cultural of the two official Flemish television channels) spent a full prime time item to the tower which attracted tourists from Amsterdam as early as the next day.[4]

Of course not all reactions were positive. Some people suggested André Singer used this as a promotion for his firm, being a building promoter advertising with *upmarket projects situated in prime locations, for office developments and residential projects*. You do not need a lot of fantasy to think he had plans with the Book tower. Fortunately we knew his real drive was the love for the high quality of the building and nothing more, he didn't need this project to be seen and didn't need the Book tower for his projects.

An active network started working in the background, preparing the case for the board of governors, and for all possible authorities that would have to be convinced.

All of a sudden a lot of unexpected things turned up. The library has a 5 year project with the department of Architecture and Urban Planning of the university focusing on the architecture collections. The building gives room to smaller exhibitions that we prefer to call *Vitrine* and it attracts quite important names. The young artist Jan de Cock presented an installation (which gave him a ticket for a one man exhibition in Tate Modern!) and architects/urbanists Frits Palmboom and Rem Koolhaas presented some of their projects. The very lively department of Architecture organises once a year a special creative week, called the *Joker-week*. In 2004 the theme of the competition was

'Branding the Booktower' or make it known to a public that doesn't know it yet. It gave wonderful results and the winner was a children's book that tells the story of a very unhappy Book tower because it has no square in front and tourists take no pictures of him, it ends with the tower moving to the moon. The Heritage Unit of the city was so pleased with the booklet that they decided to publish it and many children already know it by heart!



*The children's book made by the architecture students*

Belgium is known for chocolates and in 2005 the country celebrated its 175<sup>th</sup> birthday. Leonidas, one of the chocolate trademarks asked if the tower could be on a special gift box with typical Belgian buildings. SN airlines, the former SABENA wanted an article on the building in their airplane journal and suddenly the Book tower appeared everywhere and we could see passers-by taking pictures all the time.

It is clear that we had enough awareness, visibility and networking but we still missed something and that was ... action and clear decisions. The study told us the total cost for renovation was around 41 million euro.

The meetings that lead to the final result were set in motion by Fientje Moerman, vice minister-president of the Flemish government and Flemish minister for economy, enterprise, science, innovation and foreign trade. She knows the tower by heart, played in it as a child, her mother being the head of the medical library. As minister of economy and enterprise she was interested in the motives of André Singer and she was eager to investigate on possible ways to have the project financed and understood the restraint of some because of the huge amount of money that was concerned. So she asked for a second opinion and this study went even more in detail but presented a more or less same price.

**ACTION**

The final step though was made by vice-chancellor André De Leenheer. It was never hard to convince him of the necessity of this struggle because he recognizes art and beauty and the strength of his plea at his very last board of governors will not be forgotten by the persons present. He was surrounded by the director of the department of infrastructure, the director of the financial department who presented a clever financial plan and ... Mister Singer. Vice-chancellor De Leenheer asked the board of 33 people two questions. The first was if they recognised yes or no the international artistic importance of this building. He got a complete yes. The second question was if they agreed on a loan only for this building of an amount of 31 million euro. The other 10 million euro would be financed by the government, the city, the province etc. Thirty members said yes. Which means that on the 16<sup>th</sup> of September 2005 Van de Veldes Book tower could start a new life.

But the story does not stop here because more surprises were waiting for us. The social fabric around the tower grew more and more. Frank Beke, the mayor of the city of Ghent, Minister Freya Vandebossche and two aldermen Daniel Termont and Karin Temmerman decided to start a sponsoring action where everyone can adopt a step of the 352 steps high staircase. To allow students to join an extra sponsoring was started at the rate of 1 euro per square centimetre and there are more than 23 million to sponsor ... More than 30.000 euro has been collected yet.

Societies as the *Soroptimists* decided to save money until furniture will be bought, alumni of different disciplines suddenly wanted to revisit the tower, personnel organised parties, a very successful Ghent Blog team made a special website and planned guided tours, shops in the neighbourhood donated 1% of the income from the university, a political party [5] organised a babysitting evening in the tower on Valentines day, sportsmen climbed stairs, film marathons were held, a young senator [6] tried to convince managers to sponsor, a radio program [7] was broadcast with life public on the top of the tower (at 6 o'clock in the morning!) and the public relations campaign of the university around the slogan "dare to think" projected a wonderful big empty speech balloon during the night where everyone could think of an appropriate text to fill in. The tower became more and more visible, filmmakers wanted to use it for several locations (and yes they preferred the middle of the night ...), researchers choose the background of whatever they liked best in the building for their photographs in articles and newspapers and very often when the university was mentioned on television the Book tower appeared.

In July 2006 the composer Dirk Brossé will present "Tower high meetings", a multicultural interactive life concert with a life orchestra, the organ of the cathedral, the bells from the belfry and a streaming video connection to a multicultural music group on top of the Book tower. *Canvas*, the television channel starts at the end of the summer with a new program based on a BBC pattern on cultural heritage buildings. The "cross medial" program focuses on Flemish cultural heritage in documentaries and radio programs; goal is to choose one building that gets a special financing. Of course we applied with part of the whole project, being the wonderful belvedere on top of the tower that should be made public, so more people can enjoy the fascinating sight on the city.

And in the meantime the network in the background was working hard. The Flemish Architect showed interest in guiding the selection of the multidisciplinary design team that will perform a solid and lasting renovation in cooperation with the university. The open call was published on the 17<sup>th</sup> July 2006 and we are waiting eagerly for the results.

Since the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 2005 a new team of vice chancellor and deputy vice chancellor were elected, they immediately adopted the tower project which gives us great hope for the future. Turbulent times are ahead of us and be aware, because now you know what I mean with *never say never*, it can happen to you too.

**NOTES**

1. Thanks to Norbert Poulain for the Van de Velde information
2. It is a second stamp, the first dating from 1963
3. 17/18 of January 2004: Karel Verhoeven in *De Standaard* and Thomas Dierckens in *De Morgen*
4. 29th of January 2004
5. Fientje Moerman, Sas Van Rouveroi, Rita Uyttendaele, Catharina Seghers
6. Stefaan Noreilde
7. Radio 2 with *Ochtendpost*

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## **WEB SITES REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT**

Carl de Keyser - portfolio. <http://www.carldekeyzer.com/>

Ghent University. <http://www.ugent.be/en>