

Book Tower Images

Visualizing Henry van de Velde's
Ghent University Library Tower



Emile Sergysels, 1943-47



Belgian photographer **Emile Sergysels** (1889–1967) mostly worked in the Brussels area, photographing both traditional and modernist buildings. In line with the conventions of architectural photography, he depicted them without people, focusing entirely on the structural and formal features of the architecture. He also worked in other Belgian cities including Ghent where he photographed well-known buildings such as the Museum of Fine Arts, the Post Office, the “Plateau” Faculty Building of Engineering (close to the library), and also the Book Tower. Sergysels’s pictures were often published in architectural journals such as *L’émulation*, *L’Ossature métallique*, and *Bâtir*. Many of his

photographs of the Book Tower appeared in a 1943 issue of *Bouwkunst en Wederopbouw* as well as in *La Technique des Travaux* in 1948.

He photographed the tower on at least two occasions as one series shows the belvedere under construction and another one when the building was finished. Capturing every side of the building, he surprisingly never photographed it frontally. Even though the building is highly symmetrical, he preferred to photograph both the exteriors and interiors in a 45-degree angle.

184 BOUWKUNST EN WEDEROPOUW 3^e JAAR N^o 9-10, SEPT.-OCT. 11-12, NOV.-DEC. 1943

kon redden en vergaren en ook, wat typisch Gentisch is, worden door de meergedige lippen van ornamenten en andere Staat- en Stadsornamenten. De bakstenen laken waren van het begin af al overlopende en schiedel (1) hoofdzakelijk die verlaten lapen van een afgeschuilde stoffe. Ze liepen nu en dan wat laperend of aanriemend voort, waaraan nu een typisch portaal van L. Koolhaas.

En uderhden werd met zijn varen: Universiteit, Stad, Provincie en Staat een nieuw lang gezicht naar een goed heren. Dit is wat wat lang; maar intussen deed het bibliotheek.

(1) Na een steuningsverandering als bibliotheek, kon men in 1943 te herenmen als ... bibliotheek. Gent noch!



Arch. Prof. Henry Van de Velde: Universiteitsbibliotheek, Gent — Genl. E. Koolhaas — Prof. H. Koolhaas



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LA BIBLIOTHÈQUE CENTRALE ET L'INSTITUT SUPÉRIEUR D'HISTOIRE DE L'ART ET D'ARCHÉOLOGIE DE L'UNIVERSITÉ DE GAND (voir texte en regard)



Fig. 1 (détail) — L'escalier extérieur d'honneur en béton et en fer forgé. Détail d'entrée vers l'atrium.

Fig. 2 (détail) — La rampe principale en béton préarmé. Détail d'entrée.

Fig. 3 — Vue d'ensemble prise à l'angle du mur de la Rampe et du bâtiment principal. Les sections principales du bâtiment principal et de l'Institut supérieur d'Histoire de l'Art et d'Archéologie.

LA BIBLIOTHÈQUE CENTRALE ET L'INSTITUT SUPÉRIEUR D'HISTOIRE DE L'ART ET D'ARCHÉOLOGIE DE L'UNIVERSITÉ DE GAND

Architecte: Professeur HENRY VAN DE VELDE
Ingénieurs: Professeurs J. N. CLOUQUET, G. MAGNÉL, G. VAN ENGELEN et J. WOLTERS



Fig. 4 — Vue de l'ensemble du bâtiment principal et de l'Institut supérieur d'Histoire de l'Art et d'Archéologie. Le bâtiment principal est en béton préarmé et en fer forgé. L'Institut supérieur d'Histoire de l'Art et d'Archéologie est en pierre.

Fig. 5 — Vue d'ensemble prise à l'angle du mur de la Rampe et du bâtiment principal. Les sections principales du bâtiment principal et de l'Institut supérieur d'Histoire de l'Art et d'Archéologie.

La Bibliothèque centrale de l'Université de Gand a été fondée en 1297 comme bibliothèque de l'École centrale, instituée par le gouvernement de la République française, après le congrès de la Belgique par les Français.

Succèsivement bibliothèque de la ville (1804) et bibliothèque de l'Université (1817), ses collections ont pris une grande extension.

L'Institut supérieur d'Histoire de l'Art et d'Archéologie fut fondé en 1920 et, à son origine, il a été annexé à la Faculté de philosophie et de lettres avec une section unique d'art du moyen âge et des temps modernes. Les travaux de quatre cents d'ailleurs sont entrés. Depuis lors, l'établissement compte deux nouvelles sections consacrées à l'antiquité (Proche-Orient, l'antiquité grecque et romaine) et à l'art primitif (l'art des peuples primitifs et l'art du Sud et de l'Est de l'Asie).

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Bouwkunst en wederopbouw 3, 9-10 (1943)
La Technique des Travaux 24, 5-6 (May-June 1948)

Emile Sergysels, 1943-47

A TOWER OF PICTURES: Visualizing Henry van de Velde's Library Tower

STEVEN JACOBS



Joris Minne, *Henry van de Velde*, 1933

A library tower: a Borgesian notion that sparks the imagination but also an actual building standing on Blandijnberg, a small hill in the center of the Belgian city of Ghent. Converging a magnified bookcase and a miniaturized Tower of Babel, the building was designed by Henry van de Velde in the mid-1930s. Working and living in Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, Henry van de Velde (1863–1957) developed into a leading European artist, architect, and designer whose career ran from his experiments in Art Nouveau or Jugendstil in the 1890s to an idiosyncratic form of modernism in the 1920s and 1930s that combines classical restraint with sculptural expression.

In 1933, the Belgian government commissioned Van de Velde to design a new library for the State University of Ghent. Already early stages of the design process show a monumental building complex with a remarkable tower, which would become locally known as the “Boekentoren” or “Book Tower”.¹ A key work in his late oeuvre and an early example of a high-rise construction of reinforced concrete in Europe, the building combines a library with an institute for art history and archaeology (HIKO)—a department where Van de Velde himself lectured on the history of architecture. Assisted by Gustave Magnel (a leading expert in concrete technology) and Jean-Norbert Cloquet, Van de Velde created a modernist monument, combining an almost brutalist fascination with concrete masses with a Deco predilection for sculptural plasticity of rounded corners and a classicist preference for order in the static rhythms of columns and window openings.

Its *pièce de résistance* is the 64-meter tower of reinforced concrete with twenty floors, which tallies with his fascination with towers expressed earlier in his 1925 designs of a skyscraper city for the Left Bank of the river Scheldt in Antwerp. In addition, a 1933 drawing by Joris Minne shows Van de Velde's face in a graphic montage of spires and tower structures, one vaguely similar to what later would become the Book Tower.² [p.16] The tower was not only (literally) a giant book stack, its skyscraper look also stood for an impressive piece of modern machinery equipped with a system of pneumatic tubes sending request forms to the upper floors and a command center on the ground floor furnished with lamps, bells, and handles.³ Last but not least, the tower is crowned by an impressive belvedere, its function first and foremost ceremonial although Van de Velde once had had the (highly impractical) idea to install a “museum of the book” on top of the tower.⁴ Its mere representational function (apart from offering a magnificent panorama of Ghent) is emphasized by the pillars, vaguely reminiscent of ancient Babylonian or Egyptian architecture—at the time the building was nearly finished, Van de Velde published *La Colonne*, expressing his interest in the column as one of the origins of architecture.⁵ [p.18] With its large windows, rows of pillars, and wooden wainscotings, the belvedere appears as an orientalist dream space within the concrete mass of the tower.

1. See Beatrix Baillieul et al., *Een toren voor boeken, 1935-1985: Henry van de Velde en de bouw van de Universiteitsbibliotheek en het Hoger Instituut voor Kunstgeschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent*. Gent: RUG. Centrale bibliotheek, 1985; Greta Milis-Proost. *De Gentse Universiteitsbibliotheek als embleem van moderniteit*. Gent: Universiteit Gent, 1996; Henry van de Velde, *Universitaire Bibliotheek Gent – Boekentoren: Architect Henry van de Velde: Print van de 537 gedigitaliseerde plannen*. Brussel: Sint-Lukasarchief, 2004; *Homage: bibliotheek Universiteit Gent*. Gent: A&S Books, 2004; Anouk Devos, *De boekentoren van Henry Van de Velde*. *De Boekentoren en haar lotgenoten: een vergelijkende studie tussen drie torenbibliotheken*. MA Dissertation, Ghent University, 2009–2010; *Boekentoren, Gent – Architect Henry van de Velde: Scans en inventaris plannen*. Gent: Universiteitsbibliotheek, 2009; Ruben Mantels, *Torens Van Boeken: Universiteitsbibliotheek Gent 1797–2020*. Lichtervelde: Hannibal, 2020; *Boekentoren Gent: Van lijdensweg tot wedergeboorte*. Special Issue OKV, 2022; and Marc Dubois, “Lesen im Boekentoren,” *Bauwelt* 9 (2022): 22–35.
2. The drawing is included in a special 1933 issue of the journal *Kunst* dedicated to Henry van de Velde.
3. Mantels, 181.
4. See Beatrix Baillieul et al., 113.
5. Henry Van de Velde, *La Colonne*. Bruxelles: Ecole nationale supérieure d'architecture et des arts décoratifs, 1943.

at different moments: before it was finished (by Emile Sergysels), in a sloppily altered state in the early 1990s (by Candida Höfer), or at several moments, revealing the far-reaching effects of certain changes (by Walter Vorjohann). In addition, details in the images such as parked cars, the clothes of pedestrians, or pieces of urban infrastructure such as street lamps link the photographs by Sys, De Mulder, and others to specific moments in history.

Other architectural photographs attempt to situate the monument in its urban context, though in various if not opposite ways. Several pictures present the modernist building as a *Fremdkörper*, clashing with the houses and towers of the medieval city. Or the lit tower appears as a spectral presence in the nocturnal city. [pp. 88, 90, 91] Some Lucien Hervé photographs, for instance, emphasize differences in scale between the tower and the adjacent houses, including one with ancient stepped gables. [pp. 60–63] Likewise, some 1930s paintings by Piet Lippens, who became locally known for his topographical views of Ghent, feature a massive tower, still under construction and cropped at the painting's top side, which dwarfs the surrounding buildings. [p. 45] Other images, however, evoke a kind of organic bond between the tower and the surrounding cityscape, even hinting at a kind of “picturesque” appeal of the tower, which is situated on top of a hill. This is particularly the case in several perspectives from Muinkkaai, showing the river in the foreground and a hill with a wide variety of irregular constructions crowned by the Book Tower, which almost appears as a cathedral organically integrated in the urban fabric. A drawing, published in the Ghent socialist daily *Vooruit* in 1955, shows the tower in combination with the sixteenth-century house, the so-called “kasteelken” or “little castle of Emmaus.”³² [p. 80] Likewise, Frans Masereel depicted the tower in 1948, crowning a hill of densely built structures. [p. 26] These images evoke the multitude of drawings, paintings, and postcards that were made of this site since the eighteenth century, showing the baroque St Pieters church rising on top of the slope. Later, the church's dome offered a perfect platform to photograph the Book Tower against the Ghent medieval skyline, as Walter De Mulder did in the late 1950s or early 1960s. [p. 77]

Also other photographers and artists have pictured the library tower as an element in the surrounding cityscape. From the 1980s to the recent restoration, Michiel Hendryckx has for instance photographed the tower from various viewpoints throughout the city, often presenting it as an integral part of the medieval skyline. [p. 84] Jan Peeters, too, in his double-screen film [*meine heimat*] (2012), has dealt with the tower and its urban and rural contexts by juxtaposing a storyline of a university librarian looking for books on one of the top floors with that of an old pigeon fancier awaiting the homecoming of his pigeons, interconnecting both micro-narratives by images of birds as well as the book tower. [p. 128]

Architectural photographs usually present buildings as new, empty, with no traces of occupation, and immaculately tidied. They are depicted “in the ideal situation of a *zero hour*” as Urs Stahel described the moment when a building is finished, cleaned, and

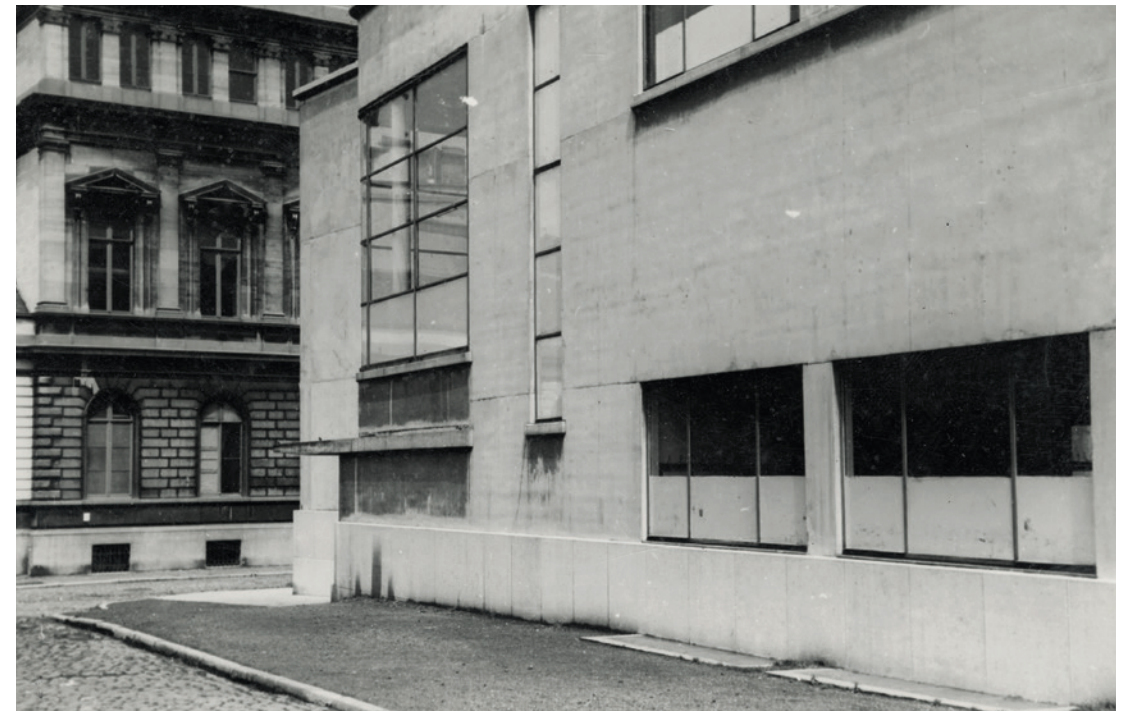
32. Lode Sanglet, “Het Casteelken van Emmaus,” *Vooruit* (26 June, 1955).
33. Urs Stahel, “Preface,” *Concrete: Fotografie und Architektur / Photography and Architecture*. Winterthur: Fotomuseum, 2013, 10.
34. Colomina, 293.



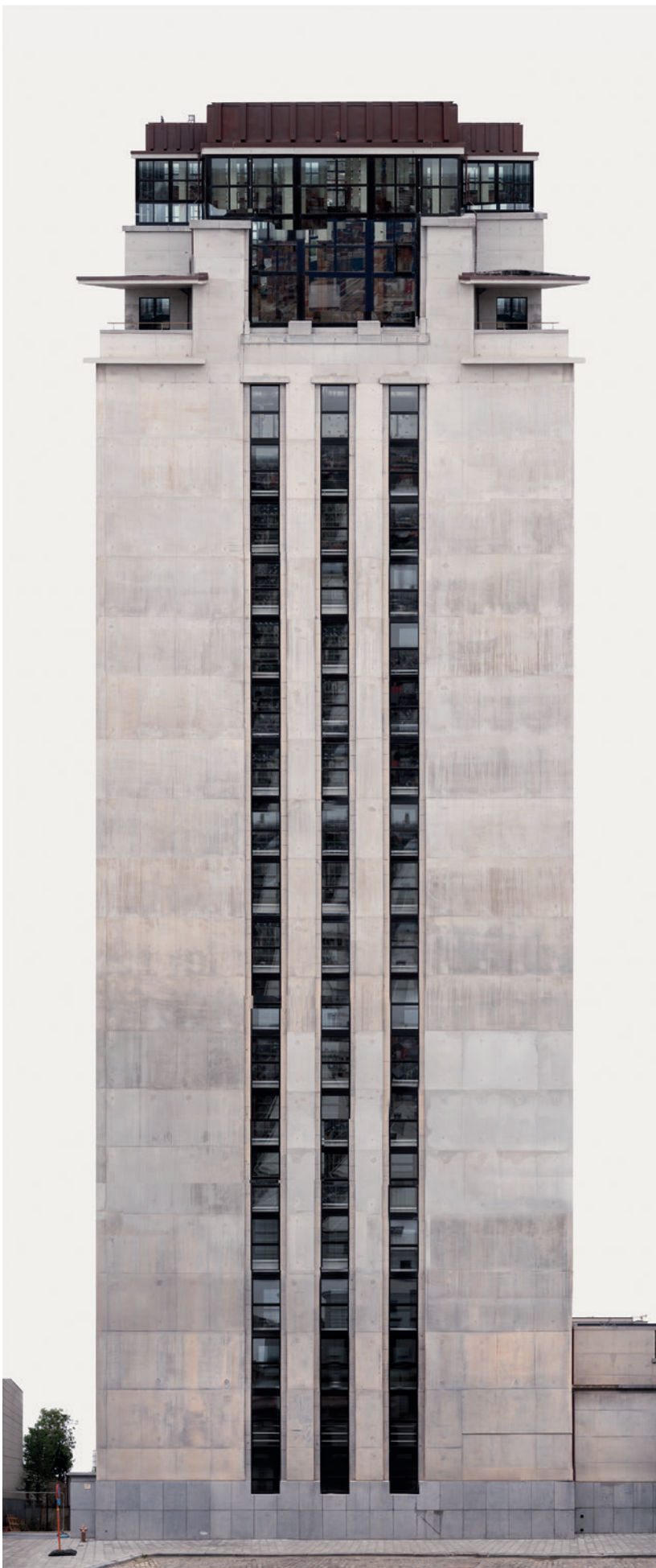
Walter De Mulder, Office of the Chief Librarian, 1950s

ready for use.³³ All secondary elements are suppressed in order to bring the design and the structure of the spaces to the foreground. Evoking the modern, the contemporary, the now, and the new, modernist architecture photography, in both its most abstract and most commodified manifestations, presents architecture as a fixed, newly completed, and unsullied ideal. The conventional architectural photograph, then, is directly associated with types of absence. At most, its spaces seem recently abandoned or on the point of being occupied—Beatriz Colomina noticed that photographs of Loos's interiors invoke the idea that someone is just about to enter, whereas in Le Corbusier's someone has just left.³⁴

Many more recent architectural visualizations precisely go against this disembodied model of architectural visualization. A member of the architects' team that was responsible for the restoration of the library, Jolien Naeyaert is highly critical of computer graphics used for architectural rendering as clients sometimes expect the same perfection in the actual building as in the rendering—a kind of digital equivalent of the aforementioned skepticism *vis-à-vis* architectural photography expressed by Harry Stuart Goodhart-Rendel and Adolf Loos. That's why *Containment*, the 2023 film she made in collaboration with Ezra Veldhuis focuses on bodily presence, the physicality of spaces, and the sensory aspects of light. [pp. 100–101] Entirely consisting of a series of still



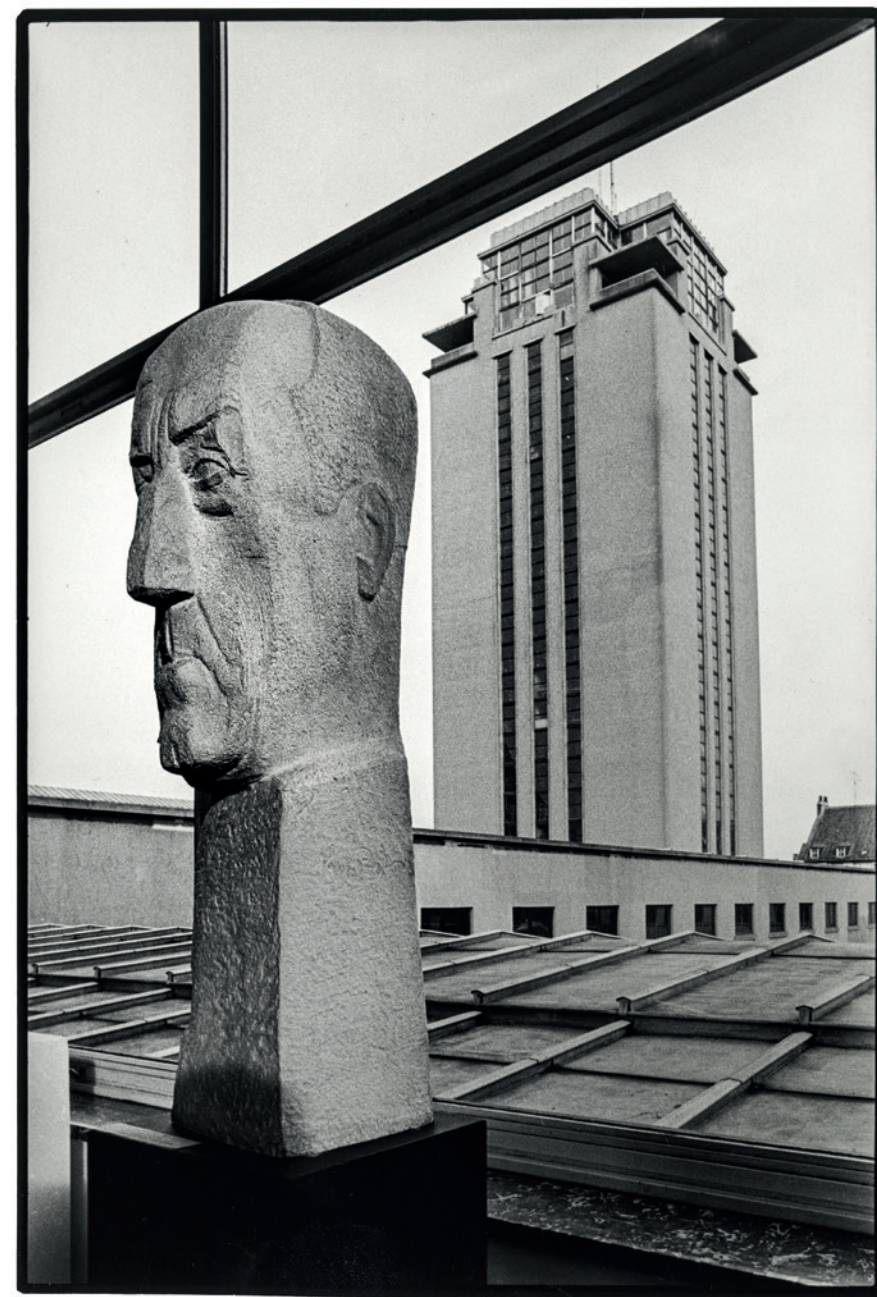
Anon., 1970s
p.55: Piet Ysabie, 1982
Ministry of Public Construction, 1944



Walter Vorjohann, Collage (160 Drone Shots), 2021
p. 65: Walter Vorjohann, Vertikal, 2021







Michiel Hendryckx, *Henry van de Velde* (1933) by Emiel Poetou, c.1985
p.72: Eric De Mildt, *Courtyard with Karel Aubroeck's Runenleester* and
Frank Van Den Berghe's *Window*, 1991



Walter Vorjohann, *Flächen und Tiefen*, 2021
 Jolien Naeyaert & Ezra Veldhuis, *Containment*, 2023, film still



Hoppla! (Wolfgang Kolb & Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, 1989),
 Production still by Herman Sorgeloos

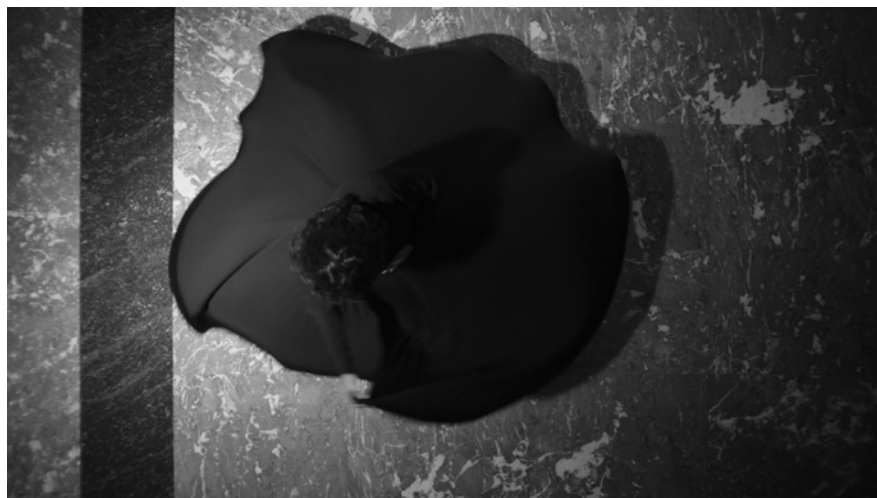
In 1989, the large reading room of the Book Tower provided the backdrop for *Hoppla!*, an award-winning film by Wolfgang Kolb, combining two choreographies by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker based on music by Béla Bartók: *Mikrokosmos* and *Quatuor No. 4*.

Created in 1987 as part of a larger piece, *Mikrokosmos* presents a “pas de deux” on seven parts of Bartók’s eponymous piece for two pianos. In the film, the two grand pianos face each other, emphasizing the horizontal strip of grey marble behind them and resonating with the dark clothes of the female and male dancer. Often evoking structural analogies between music and dance in many of her earlier pieces, De Keersmaeker’s choreography now also relates to the geometric principles of Van de Velde’s architecture. Apart from a row of chairs, the room remains empty, animated by the natural light that enters through the large windows. The symmetrical interplay of lines spread across the marble floor patterns provides the stage for the dancers, following the lines, crossing them, or spinning around on them. At the end of this section, Kolb also rotates the camera

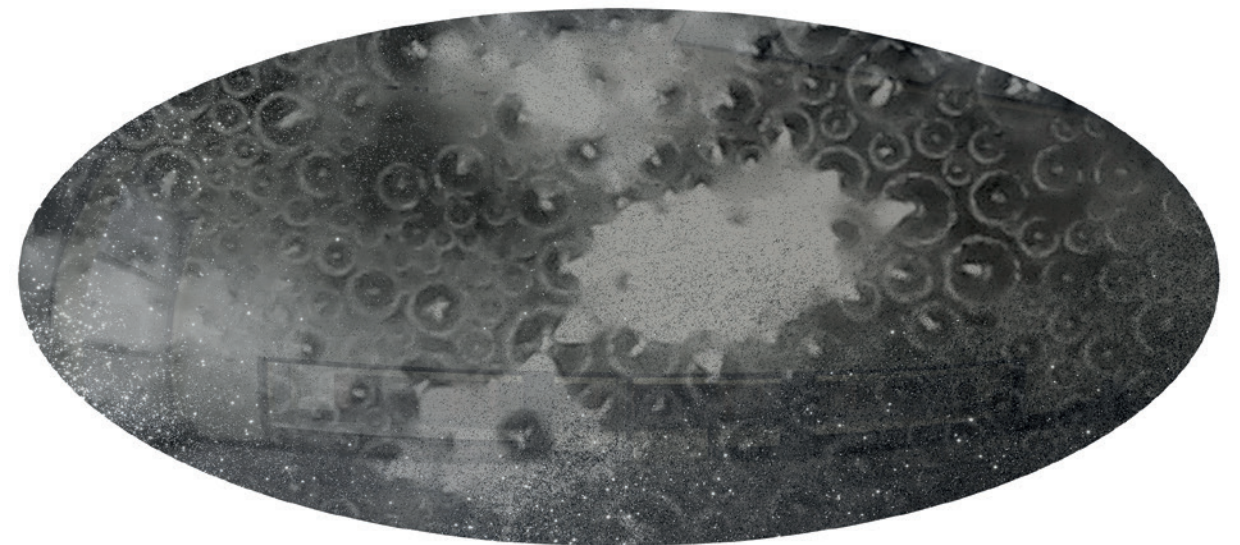
180 degrees around its axis in the middle of the room.

The film’s second part reinterprets the 1986 piece *Bartók/Notes*, a choreography on Bartók’s fourth string quartet with four girls in school uniforms. Marked by Kolb’s fast-paced montage and abundant use of close-ups, this piece is more energetic, its playfulness perfectly evoked in Herman Sorgeloos’s photographs. In a striking interlude, the dancers catch their breath beside the monumental bookcase, which reveals for the first time in the film the space’s function as a library. The combined attention to both geometric structures and small human gestures is perfectly in line with Van de Velde’s architecture that also combines formal uniformity with expressive plasticity.

De Keersmaeker’s exploration of the Book Tower was her first choreographic as well as cinematic take on the architecture of Van de Velde. In 1997, his Technical School in Leuven (now also a library) featured in Thierry De Mey’s film adaptation of *Rosas Danst Rosas*.



Dirk Braeckman, *Penelope*, 2017, film stills
 p.105: Dirk Braeckman, *EE.m.WP.(t)here.2021 1/1*, 2021



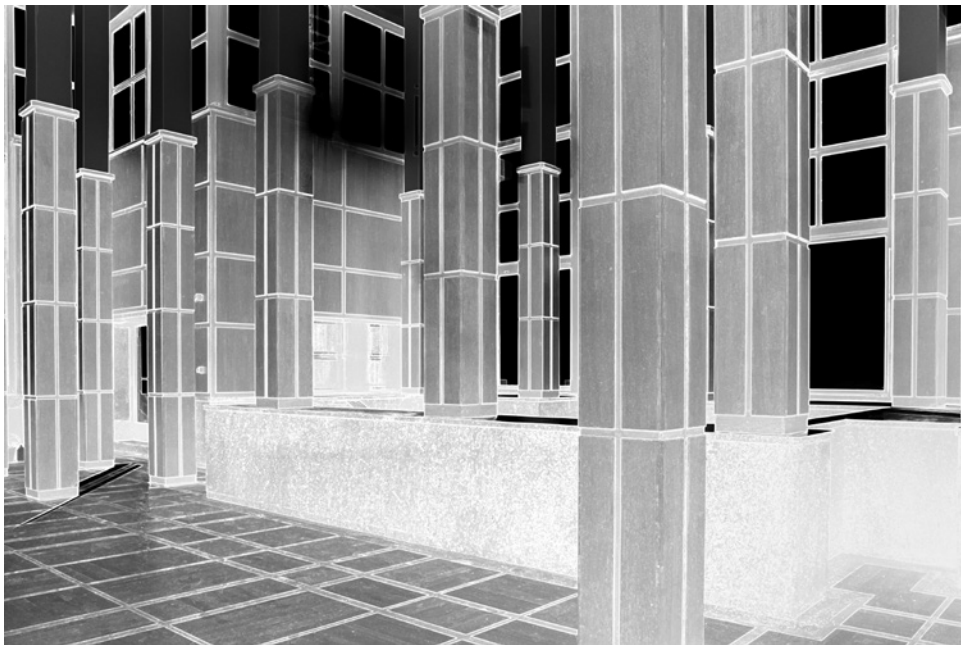
Belgian artist **Dirk Braeckman** (b. 1958) captures places where time seems to stand still. The photographs shot inside the Book Tower during restoration are no exception. Dark corridors and gutted interiors present the library as an empty shell. A lonely chair and a quarter-turned latch emphasize this, suggesting that people have long left the scene. The only one who is truly present is Braeckman himself. By having the flashlight of the camera reflect in the windows, the artist reveals both his own presence and that of the photographic apparatus.

However, Braeckman does not consider these photographs as part of his artistic oeuvre. They are simply raw footage of a tower under construction, preparations for a film. In 2013, the artist created a black-and-white film for the autumn/winter show of the Belgian fashion house A.F. Vandevorst. Sporting a giant wig that conceals her face, Lisbeth Gruwez dances on the terrace and marble staircase of the belvedere. Medium shots alternate with close-ups while the camera takes up dizzying positions. Not time, but space is the dimension Braeckman focuses on. He transforms

the Book Tower into a dynamic stage on which Gruwez moves like a living mannequin. A similar approach can be found in the film *Penelope*, which Braeckman created in cooperation with Voetvolk as a reinterpretation of Gruwez's dance during the play *Odysseus. Een zwerver komt thuis* (2017). Gruwez dances hypnotizing pirouettes in the grand reading room. Once again, her face remains hidden. This time, there is no wig, but only the speed of her movements and the gray color tones, adding a dark layer to the film.

Time and space come together in the in situ work *EE.m.WP.(t)here.2021 1/1*, installed in the library's small reading room, formerly the "room for periodicals." It is now both the subject of and the showroom for Braeckman's work, reflecting the rectangular windows. Its elliptical shape breaks with the rigid lines of the architecture. By simultaneously resisting and adding to Van de Velde's geometric architecture, Braeckman opens up a new architectural conversation with the Book Tower.





LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS
AND EXHIBITS

All items are included in the exhibition unless mentioned otherwise

[pp.5-15]

Emile Sergysels, Ghent University Library, 1943-47. Photographs, 17,5 x 23 cm. KBR (Royal Library of Belgium), Brussels — AML (Archives and Museum of Literature), fund Henry van de Velde. © AML

[p.10]

Sergysels photograph illustrating an article by August Desmet and an advertisement in *Bouwkunst en wederopbouw: maandschrift gewijd aan architectuur, urbanisme, bouwtechniek, decoratieve kunst, binnenhuiskunst* 3, 9-10 (1943). Ghent: University Library — Book Tower

Sergysels photographs illustrating an article by Leonide Novgorodsky in *La Technique des Travaux: revue des procédés de construction modernes* 24, 5-6 (May-June, 1948): 130-31. Ghent: University Library — Book Tower

[p.16]

Joris Minne, *Portrait of Henry van de Velde*, 1933. Copper engraving included in Henry Van de Velde and Jean Van de Voort, "Gedenkboek Henry van de Velde," in *Kunst: maandblad voor oude en jonge beeldende-, bouw en sierkunsten, muziek, ...* (1933). Ghent: University Library — Book Tower

[p.18]

Henry van de Velde, *La Colonne*, Brussels: Ecole nationale supérieure d'architecture et des arts décoratifs, 1943. Ghent: University Library — Faculty of engineering and architecture

[p.19]

Willy Kessels, Henry van de Velde, 1930s. Photograph, 30 x 24 cm. KU Leuven Libraries, fund Verwilghen. Variant (same size) in exhibition: Brussels: CIVA, fund Willy Kessels

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Maurice Casteels, *Henry van de Velde*, Bruxelles: Editions des cahiers de Belgique, 1932. Ghent: University Library — Book Tower and Faculty Library of Architecture and Engineering

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Envelope for set of postcards, published by Ghent University library, 1927, 10 x 15 cm. Ghent: University Library — Book Tower

[p.26]

Frans Masereel, *The Tower of the University Library, seen from Muinkkaai*, 1948. Oil on canvas, monogrammed, 70 x 60 cm. Black-and-white reproduction from Beatrix Baillieul et al., *Een toren voor boeken, 1935-1985: Henry van de Velde en de bouw van de Universiteitsbibliotheek en het Hoger Instituut voor Kunstgeschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent*. Ghent: RUG. Centrale bibliotheek, 1985. (not in exhibition)

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Walter De Mulder, Office of the chief librarian, 1950s. Photograph, 12 x 17 cm. Ghent: University Library — Book Tower

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Stijn Bollaert, New entrance by Robbrecht en Daem architecten, 2019. Photograph (not in exhibition)

Stijn Bollaert, Extension by Robbrecht en Daem architecten, 2019. Photograph (not in exhibition)

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François Schuiten, Henry van de Velde and the Book Tower. Drawing, 2003. Included in François Schuiten & Benoît Peeters, *Bruxelles, un rêve capital*. Brussels: Casterman, 2021, 73. Exhibition copy

[p.34]

Cover based on a Sergysels photograph of *La Technique des Travaux: revue des procédés de construction modernes* 24, 5-6 (May-June, 1948). Ghent: University Library — Book Tower

[p.35]

Kristien Daem, 2021. Color photograph. Collection of the artist.

Emile Sergysels, Ghent University Library, 1943-47. Glass positive, 8,5 x 10 cm. Ghent: University Library — Book Tower

[pp.36-37]

Filip Dujardin, *Untitled*, 2023. Cast concrete, 200 x 70 cm, digital sketch by the artist

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top left: Library, Baudelo Abbey, Ottogracht, Ghent, date unknown. Postcard, c. 11 x 17 cm. Ghent: Archief Gent

middle left: Library façade at Ottogracht, date unknown. Photograph, 18 x 24 cm. Ghent: University Library — Book Tower

right: Library, Baudelo Abbey, Ottogracht, Ghent, date unknown. Postcards, c. 11 x 17 cm. Ghent: Archief Gent

bottom: Jef Wante, Interior Library at Ottogracht, July 1920. Photograph, 29 x 34,7 cm (sheet), 17 x 22,2 cm (photograph). Ghent: University Library — Book Tower

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Jacques Hersleven, Aerial view of Ghent with St Pieters Square, c. 1925. Negative, Brussels: KIK-IRPA. © KIK-IRPA (not in exhibition)

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Emile Sergysels, Ghent University, Institute of Sciences (architect: Adolphe Pauli) at Plateaustraat, c. 1930. Gelatin silver print mounted on wood, original frame, 57,5 x 44,5 cm (print). Brussels: Royal Museum of Art and History

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top left: Rozier 3-7 with Book Tower, date unknown. Photograph, 15 x 21 cm. Ghent: Archief Gent

top right: Blandijn, with the De Vreese tenements, date unknown. Hand-colored photograph, 18 x 24 cm. Ghent: University Library — Book Tower

middle left: View on Rozier from Sint Pietersnieuwstraat, date unknown. Photograph, 20,5 x 28 cm. Ghent: Archief Gent

middle right: Rozier, 1979. Photograph, 18 x 25 cm. Ghent: Archief Gent

bottom left: Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat, corner Rozier, vanished cityscape, now occupied by the University Library, February 1908. Photograph, 14,5 x 20 cm. Ghent: Archief Gent

bottom right: Worker's houses in Rozier to make way for the Book Tower, date unknown. Photograph, 14,5 x 20,5 cm. Ghent: Archief Gent