

BELGIUM: CONTROVERSY SURROUNDS PLANNED MAKEOVER OF ART DECO LANDMARK

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While some hail the architectural vision as keeping with the times, others have raised concerns that it might be no more than a vanity project—one which makes for an ill-fit with its environment.

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The Boerentoren, an iconic Antwerp monument, will soon be [getting a facelift](#), VRT NWS reports. Daniel Libeskind, a modernist architect of worldwide renown, won an architectural competition and has presented a digital rendering of how Europe's first skyscraper, all spruced up, might look.

<https://twitter.com/hoogbouw/status/1595145206923689984>

Architect Daniel Libeskind was chosen by the tower's owner, wealthy entrepreneur Fernand Huts, who had bought the property two years ago. At the time of his acquisition, he said he wanted to turn it into a "cultural temple." An idea that now, it would seem, has taken shape.

Speaking of his pet project, Huts stated he "wouldn't be an Antwerper if [he] didn't think big."

Libeskind, on his part, explained that the aim of the project was to "connect heritage with the future to give the public an international attraction."

Completed in 1931 to a height of 87.5 meters, the Boerentoren (Peasants Tower) remained

the second tallest structure in the city after the gothic Cathedral of our Lady (123 meters). For some time, it exemplified Belgian architectural ambition keeping pace with the Americans and their Art Deco skyscrapers (such as Manhattan's 1930 Chrysler Building). While some could not stomach the modernist style, as it dominated the historic city center, over time, the Boerentoren, now a protected monument, stole Antwerp residents' hearts.

In 1970, the tower was renovated by then owner Belgian financial company KBC and an extension was added. Today, it boasts a height of 97.75 meters. Because the Art Deco-styled landmark had long been in need of renovation, it was closed for a couple of years while asbestos removal work took place.

Libeskind has offered assurances that the old Boerentoren's Art Deco elements will be meticulously preserved. Libeskind's aim is to bring nature and heritage into one harmonious whole. Nestled against the tower will be a glass crest of some kind, filled with plant life. "A 'garden prow,'" the American architect specified.

Of Polish-Jewish extraction, but an American citizen since 1965, Libeskind is well-known for having designed the master plan for Ground Zero after the 9/11 attacks in New York, as well as designing the Jewish Museum in Berlin and others in several major cities.

Jewish Museum, Berlin

While some anticipate the renovation as part of 'keeping with the times,' others have raised concerns that it might be no more than a vanity project for Huts—less interested in turning in a respectfully redesigned building which makes for an elegant fit with its surroundings than in garnering a name for himself.

Some have even taken to posting amusing memes, in protest of Huts' plans.

<https://twitter.com/editorbelga/status/1595054751921897472>

Antwerp, as it so happens, is no stranger to modernist misadventures—its spike-roofed courthouse, built in 2006, still offers the starkest of warnings.

The most controversial aspect of the newly envisioned Boerentoren, then, is its top. Huts has promised this would offer a 360-degree panoramic view. However, the height will not exceed Antwerp's Cathedral of Our Lady, which reaches 123 meters.

"This space won't be for offices or flats, only exhibition rooms accessible to everyone and all possible catering facilities," Huts—besides an art collector somewhat of a *mecenas*—assured. "We are choosing culture ... For the first time in its history, the Boerentoren will have a fully public function."

Huts is aware that the plans will stir up debate: "A city without debate is a dead city," he said, while adding that "a discussion will erupt but we want to embrace it. We are deliberately not choosing mediocrity: Antwerp and Flanders [Dutch speaking part of Belgium] are world-class and we want to show that." While the services of Antwerp architectural firm ELD have been enlisted, critics deem it a shame that no Belgian architect, instead of an American one, had been called upon.

Flemish Minister of Heritage Matthias Diependaele (N-VA), meanwhile, is trying to bring calm to the debate. Having had talks with Huts, he said he admires his interlocutor's entrepreneurial spirit and "the audacity with which such a large project is being tackled."

Together with his department, Diependaele is currently exploring how the 1930s Art Deco jewel would mesh with the new elements. To that end, a steering committee, in which all the advisory groups will have a voice, will be set up. In this way, according to the minister, a public debate between experts, the people of Antwerp, and "all of Flanders" can be had.

Personally, Diependaele believes that new layers can be added to monuments, provided this is done with respect.

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The project aims to be completed by 2027, though an exact timeline still needs to be approved by various authorities. Already in 2021, work began in the building to remove the asbestos—a task that will take until 2024. Thereafter, refurbishment and construction are expected to take two more years.