

**THE
FARMERS'
TOWER
STORY OF AN ICON**

HANNIBAL

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It stands staunch and unflinching. With its spire brushing the clouds. Proud as only an *Antwerpenaar* (an Antwerp local) can be. And as unyielding as a farmer.

It continues to reach resolutely for the sky despite its eventful past. And although the ravages of time gnaw mercilessly behind its façade, a bright, monumental future still lies in wait for the Farmers' Tower (Boerentoren).

When I told my 95-year-old mother that we were going to purchase the Farmers' Tower, she replied: 'So there is still justice in the world.'

Was there an injustice that needed to be righted? Actually, there was. And that takes us back to the bleak 1930s, when my mother, a farmer's daughter, was growing up. Her family, like so many other farming families, suffered from the severe economic problems encountered by the Boerenbond and Kredietbank, the bank that managed the savings of so many Flemish farmers.

These farmers saw the tower, which *Antwerpenaars* had mockingly named after them, as a painful reminder. They faced desperate times while the bankers looked out over the city and the land from their luxurious building. The nickname that *Antwerpenaars* had assigned to the country's very first skyscraper only rubbed salt in the wound.

Fortunately, the bank recovered and evolved to become 'the local bank'. This also allowed the Farmers' Tower to fulfil its role as a symbol of the financial and economic prosperity of enterprising Flanders.





INTRODUCTION



The Farmers' Tower is not just a building. It never has been. From the design phase in the 1920s, the Tower Building (*Torengebouw*), as it was officially known for decades, was intended to serve as an iconic landmark in the centre of Antwerp, a symbol of the progress and prosperity of the metropolis. And the skyscraper more than lived up to that aspiration. Almost immediately, the Farmers' Tower grew to become the most important landmark on Antwerp's skyline, along with the Gothic Cathedral of Our Lady.

This book tells the story of the Farmers' Tower. It begins with the search for an inspiring design in the 1920s. This was followed by the laborious construction of the skyscraper in the 1930s and the near demolition of the monument in the 1960s, culminating in its complete renovation and expansion. For now, the history of the Farmers' Tower ends with its comprehensive redevelopment in the 1990s and the ongoing asbestos problem in the twenty-first century.

Above all, this publication is a search for the iconic building's significance. Its significance to the directors of Kredietbank and its successor KBC, whose ambition was for the Farmers' Tower to be a prestigious office building and a showcase. Its significance to the architects who designed and revamped the building, and to the contractors and construction workers who built and refurbished the complex – sometimes risking their lives. Its significance to the people who lived and worked there for a lifetime, who shopped there or passed by the building every day, or who looked out on it from afar. The Farmers' Tower has played a major role in the lives of hundreds of thousands of people during its existence, which spans almost one hundred years, and still does today. All these people, in their own way, gave meaning to the place and afforded the stone-and-steel structure a soul.









1

**THE
CITY
BEFORE
THE
FARMERS'
TOWER**

Johan Op de Beeck



TOWERS AND ICONS: ANTWERP IN THE TIME OF JOSEPH II, NAPOLEON AND LEOPOLD II

Just as the River Scheldt ebbs and flows, the history of Antwerp's economic prosperity is a tale of highs and lows. Once the economic capital of Europe, Antwerp almost had to start from scratch as the sixteenth century drew to a close. The Eighty Years War, the Spanish Fury and other Antwerp upheavals were not the only causes. Sometimes, it all boils down to not having the right people in the right place. 'The merchants keep their businesses running here with astounding resignation,' wrote Damiens de Gomicourt, a journalist from Amiens in the final years of the eighteenth century. 'It is said that the *Antwerpenaar* is greedy, that he only acts when he is sure there is money to be made from it, that whoever tries to get him to act only succeeds if he offers him a fixed salary, and yet, I have never met anyone as apathetic and inactive as an Antwerp entrepreneur,' deduced this well-travelled observer. The German Baron von Pöllnitz was also quite harsh in his assessment. He considered it rather odd that trade was languishing at a time when many extremely wealthy families still lived in Antwerp and wore silk and lace-lined suits while their wives 'dressed like princesses'. Brussels, incidentally, suffered the same predicament. The biggest problem in Brussels and thus also in Antwerp was not the lack of capital, but the lack of an entrepreneurial mindset. The money wasn't rolling in, and Antwerp was slowly languishing. Fortunately, by then, Antwerp had proved that it did have a lot to offer. In fact, it had enjoyed a veritable golden age. Between 1500 and 1585, the City on the Scheldt had grown from ten thousand inhabitants to one hundred thousand. The *Antwerpenaars* had succeeded in making their city a trading hub that was unparalleled in Europe. Instead of religious narrow-mindedness, tolerance prevailed, trade and new ideas were given free rein, and book printing and other arts flourished. Erasmus and Thomas More occasionally resided there, and it was where Christophe Plantin set up the world's largest printing house and Pieter Bruegel the Elder painted his *Little Tower of Babel*. However, what truly stole the show was a real tower made of stone and wood. From 1518, the city had a divine landmark to admire, the 123-metre-high north tower of the Church of Our Lady. While the church was yet to be promoted to a cathedral upon the establishment of the Diocese of Antwerp in 1559, its grandeur was nevertheless imposing. An ode to gothic beauty paid for by the city-council, it was also a lasting legacy of

Antwerp's identity. It would be four centuries before the tower faced competition on the Antwerp skyline in that regard. Let that be a lesson for today. Truly great projects are not commonplace. They emerge from the foundations of a vision, capital and a sense of glory. Such historic moments occur when governments and entrepreneurs that possess those qualities strive for the seemingly unattainable. They are not above criticism but should still be cherished and encouraged. And we should not blame others too much for our own failures.

Because that is exactly what Antwerp did when the city received a visit from the head of state for the first time in 222 years. The event unfolded between 18 and 21 June 1781. Joseph II, the Habsburg emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and the Austrian monarchy, observed what so many other travellers had seen before him: a sharp contrast between grandeur and decay. There was praise for the wide streets, the grand Meir, Rubens, the stunning architecture. Perhaps also for the tower houses because, after all, the so-called *pagadder* towers were not unimportant. They had been built in prosperous times by merchants who wanted tall tower houses to demonstrate how well they were doing. In other words, bragging rights but with style. The Bononiensis map, originally from 1565, reveals that the city was home to just under 50 *pagadder* towers. Several can still be seen next to house De Spieghel and house Draecke, or near Hofstraat and the 'Oude Borse', which received a stone tower instead of a wooden one in 1515. But in the late-eighteenth century, things were pretty dire on the floor of the stock exchange, with even the mice starving. Lots of splendid townhouses stood empty. The centre appeared to be deserted. During an audience at Antwerp city hall, Emperor Joseph II explained that it was not the city's fault. After all, Antwerp's lifeline had been severed. Under pressure from the Dutch and English, the River Scheldt had been blockaded since 1585. The local administration begged for the Scheldt to be reopened. The emperor promised to work on it. But we also know that he did not think highly of the entrepreneurs and wealthy individuals who populated Antwerp at the time. *Antwerp, oh mein Gott!*







2

**A
SKY
SCRAPER
FOR
THE
CITY**

Jonas Raats

ANTWERP IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD: A FERTILE BREEDING GROUND FOR BUILDERS

Antwerp's city centre emerged from World War I battered and bruised. Work to rebuild the city began without delay. In 1919, to fill the crater on Schoenmarkt, architects were asked to submit a proposal for a building worthy of occupying the position at the end of Meir. One of the proposals was submitted by architect Jos Smolderen, who would later be part of the team of architects that designed the Farmers' Tower. Just try and imagine this sight next time you visit Meir.

None of the competition plans were implemented, but the seed for a new landmark in the city centre had been planted. That seed had landed in fertile soil and ten years later, under the influence of new trends and at the initiative of an ambitious city-council and a bank focused on prestige, it would grow into the Farmers' Tower.

During the interwar period, new building trends emerged, and a city like Antwerp offered many opportunities in architecture and urban planning. At the time, this combination made Antwerp the ideal location for Belgium's first skyscraper.

After the miserable years of war, life in the city and the economy quickly rebounded. The diamond industry was flourishing, modern factories were springing up in and around the city, and the port was also quickly returning to its pre-war growth path. Antwerp's population had risen to just over 300,000, an all-time high.

In the early interwar period, Antwerp was characterised by battered buildings, a booming economy and a rapidly growing population. This combination of factors made one thing clear: the city needed more housing and structural architectural interventions. Fortunately for the city-council, many acres of land had been freed up for development because building regulations near military structures (such as the Brialmont ramparts) had been relaxed considerably. Moreover, Antwerp was able to expand its territory during this period by annexing parts of the surrounding municipalities. Thus, in 1923, a piece of East Flanders – aptly named Linkeroever from an Antwerp perspective – was added to the city's territory.

And there were other reasons for revamping Antwerp. During the interwar period, Antwerp hosted two major international events: the 1920 Olympic Games and the 1930 World Fair. The city wanted to pull out all the stops, especially for the latter. The prospect of the World Fair provided the impetus for the construction of new infrastructure, residential areas and buildings.

In other words, the Antwerp of the 1920s and 1930s was a playground for architects and urban planners. Numerous opportunities presented themselves, both to build and rebuild housing and to design completely new urban districts. The question was: would the city embrace new architectural trends, such as Modernism and Art Deco? Or would it cling on to the familiar pre-war architectural styles?

THE INTERWAR PERIOD. A NEW ERA, A NEW TYPE OF ARCHITECTURE?

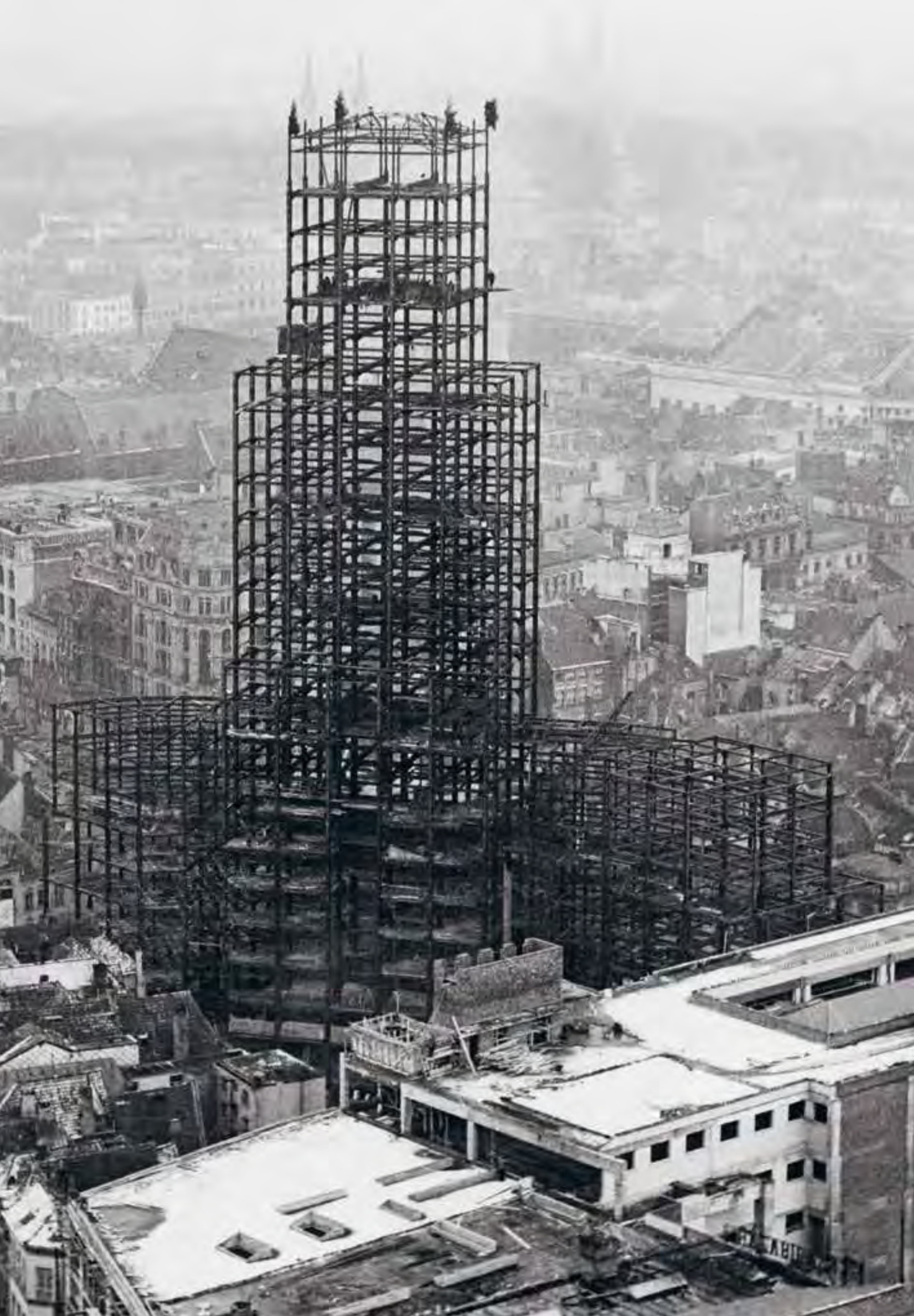
During the interwar period, there were three main movements in Belgian architecture: Art Deco, Modernism and Traditionalism. A battle of ideas raged between the proponents of the different movements, as did the battle to win contracts. Traditionalists were the winners of the reconstruction: almost all the reconstruction projects were implemented in a classical, traditional architectural style. Nevertheless, other markets emerged in the interwar period that could be tapped into. The housing shortage was severe, which meant social housing, new housing developments and apartment complexes had to be built. In that segment, the popularity of Art Deco soared during the interwar period.

During most of the nineteenth century, Belgian architects relished emulating their architectural past. Building styles that harked back to the architecture of the past, the so-called neo-styles (especially Neo-Gothicism, Neo-Renaissance and Neoclassicism), were particularly popular. But by the end of the century, most architecture enthusiasts renounced the neo-styles as outdated and bourgeois. In Antwerp and other cities, they had to make way for Art Nouveau, a construction and artistic style that set the tone at the turn of the century.

AND THE WORLD FAIR?

The city had been eager to show off its new, modern tower building at the 1930 World Fair. It was also the intention for the Tower Building, as the Farmers' Tower would officially be called, to be ready by then. That deadline was not achieved, and the steel frame had only just been erected when the World Fair opened on 26 April 1930. However, this did not deter the city, which cleverly turned the situation to its advantage, stating that the Tower was meant to be unfinished so everyone could see exactly how a skyscraper was built during the World Fair. And nobody could deny that it was quite the spectacle!







3

**THE
FARMERS'
TOWER'S
CON
STRUC
TION**

Veronique Van Humskerke

FROM FOUNDATION TO FIRMAMENT

To construct the foundations and basements of the Farmers' Tower, 7,000 cubic metres of soil were excavated. Those works required water to be permanently pumped out, sometimes up to a million litres a day. The Tower's foundations can be described as a floating raft: on a layer of cement and gravel with a massive reinforced concrete foundation slab above it lies a water-resistant tank. The tank is held in place by the upward and lateral pressure of the groundwater. This means that water management under and around the foundation is critical to the stability of the Tower. Therefore, eight filter wells under the tank lower the water level, and in turn, the underground water-resistant tank is held in place with metal sheet piles.

The Tower's steel skeleton frame was erected on the foundations. Dumon & Vander Vin had assumed that the skeleton frame of the tower could be erected in reinforced concrete. However, schematic plans of the tower drafted in 1927 included a steel construction. After all, for a building consisting of 25 floors on top of the ground floor, you need a steel skeleton frame instead of reinforced concrete if you want to retain sufficient usable area. But Dumon & Vander Vin didn't have a clue about that. Once again, it was the bank that had to find a solution. After requesting bids from several firms – three Belgian and one German – Demag Aktiengesellschaft from Duisburg was selected to design and build the steel structure. The firm was slightly more expensive than its competitors but promised to complete the works faster than the ten months expected by the bank.

The builders used some 3,400 tons of steel. At the bottom, they secured vertical piles to a support of steel profiles and sheets. The supports, in turn, were secured to the solid concrete slab with bolts. The workmen solved the puzzle of one floor after another on this construction by securing vertical piles and horizontal beams together with screws and rivets.

The foundation and frames of the Tower and side wings are built to provide the tower with some space. It was estimated that, with its 18,000 to 20,000 tons on 616 square metres, it could sink up to 5 centimetres over time. Moreover, it had to be able to move freely in strong winds without causing damage to the side wings. When filling the drinking- and fire-extinguishing-water tank on the twenty-fifth floor – good for 230 tons of additional weight – the Tower would have already sunk 1 millimetre. By 1980, the Farmers' Tower had already sunk 3 centimetres.

'A BRILLIANT EXAMPLE OF ORGANISATION AND CALCULATION'

People who passed the site on a daily basis saw the skeleton frame rise day by day, far above the surrounding buildings, taller than any other building in the city except the nearby cathedral. The fact that quite a few spectators followed the progress of the works with great interest – and, after a while, perhaps a stiff neck – is evident from newspaper articles dating from that period: 'The entire population of Antwerp have watched the construction of this giant building with interest. Hundreds of them stand daily with their nose skywards, gazing high above, where workmen, an inch tall, are at work, riveting the steel skeleton frame together piece by piece in a hodge-podge of steel trusses, just like children playing with Meccano at home. Every passer-by stops in his tracks to admire and critique.'

Het Handelsblad knew why the site received so much attention, from local Antwerp residents as well as from 'delegates' from neighbouring countries, students from technical schools and prospective engineers: 'It is quite a sensation in Antwerp, firstly because it is something new, something totally unknown, and most of all, because it is an incredible challenge, a brilliant example of organisation and calculation.' In short, a real spectacle.

People in Antwerp, Belgium and some neighbouring countries could also follow the Farmers' Tower's construction from home. Newspapers regularly reported on the works. In April 1930, *Het Handelsblad* described the kind of crane that had been needed to install the heavy steel piles and sleepers. On the subject of the construction workers, the newspaper wrote: 'Specialist workers, nimble as cats and totally immune to vertigo, who give onlookers the shivers when they observe the daring acrobatics they perform 60-70 metres above the ground, have the simple task of riveting the parts together using air hammers.'



PONS

ELKS LODGE

THE OFFICE





4 **LIFE
IN THE
FARMERS'
TOWER
1931—
1970**

Peter Van der Hallen

DEENBOS
& WITZ

AGENTS
MARITIMES

KREDIETBANK



BANKING IN A TOWER?

Local Antwerp residents tend to think of the Farmers' Tower as 'the bank's tower'. But the Tower was much more than just the branch of a bank: it was the prestigious home of a major bank. Customers of the bank walked through the beautiful Art Deco gate open-mouthed, thrilled to have the opportunity to open an account at the bank. It was a place where the expensive luxury of the director's floor served to remind the more affluent customers that they were in an 'establishment they could trust'.

The Farmers' Tower was more than the bank's tower; it was a tower of people. People who not only worked but also lived, shopped, ate and drank there, or who just came to enjoy the view. The tower often had a special meaning for them. Some experienced joyful moments there or equally terrifying ones, and some even met the love of their lives.

TOWER COMPLETE, BANK BANKRUPT (OR VERY NEARLY)

The Farmers' Tower was firstly the 'bank's tower', more specifically of the Algemeene Bankvereniging. That made its location on Meirbrug far from coincidental. For a long time, Meir, with access to the Antwerp Stock Exchange, was an important banking hub in Antwerp. Also located on Meir were Paribas in the Osterrieth House and Banque d'Anvers (later taken over by Generale Bank), among others. Plans to build the Tower emerged during the Roaring Twenties, an era characterised by a financial boom, especially during the second half of that decade. But once the Tower was completed, the financial climate appeared to have totally changed. The crash of the Wall Street stock market in October 1929 resulted in the entire world spiralling into a severe economic depression. A maelstrom that also dragged the owner of the Farmers' Tower down into the darkest depths.

The Farmers' Tower was initially owned by the newly formed Algemeene Bankvereniging, which managed the building through its subsidiary Mobezeit. The Algemeene Bankvereniging was an amalgamation of a number of local banks and was largely controlled in financial terms by the Boerenbond, the professional association of Flemish farmers. The Algemeene Bankvereniging moved from its former office on Lange Nieuwstraat to the Tower on 29 March 1932. Kredietbank was created as early as 1935 following another merger with the Bank voor Handel en Nijverheid (Bank for Trade and Industry), which operated in Kortrijk. The amalgamation with the Kortrijk bank came out of necessity: a reorganisation was needed after the Boerenbond's banking activities ran into serious financial trouble during the Great Depression. A few years later, after a substantial capital increase, the Boerenbond became a minority shareholder in the new concern, which from then on, was mainly controlled by a few wealthy families.

SHAREHOLDERS IN ANTWERP, BOSSES IN BRUSSELS

Kredietbank was a distinctly Flemish bank which considered Flanders and Brussels as its operating area. Thus, from the beginning, the institution chose Dutch as its corporate language, from the top to the bottom of the hierarchy. In the 1930s, this was a genuine exception for a major Belgian company. Nevertheless, as a financial institution, the bank did stay far away from politics and the Flemish issue itself.

Therefore, loyal to its Flemish character, the bank's registered office was in Antwerp – world port and the largest city in Flanders. Moreover, the prestigious Farmers' Tower was one of six Kredietbank offices where people could go to perform complicated operations and that functioned as a stand-alone bank. It was also where shareholders gathered for their general meetings.

At the same time, it was impossible to function as a major Belgian bank without also having a command centre in Brussels, the beating heart of the country's money and capital markets. Therefore, the bank had its administrative headquarters in Brussels, where the executive committee took care of its day-to-day management.

In the decades after 1930, Kredietbank began to take up more and more space in the Farmers' Tower. A securities room and safe-deposit-box vault were constructed in the basement. The bank also took over the space occupied by Tearoom Cuperus.



KREDIE

PANDRAMA

35

Podles



ET BANK

37







STORIES ABOUT THE FARMERS' TOWER

Icing on the cake

No Antwerp local will deny that the Farmers' Tower is an indispensable part of Antwerp's skyline, as spices are in Elixir d'Anvers. Many of us remember the letters 'KB' that adorned the top of the tower. In the early years of the Tower Building, the name 'Chicory De Beukelaar' first proudly occupied this position. After the merger of the Algemeene Bankvereniging with the Bank voor Handel en Nijverheid (Bank for Trade and Industry), an eye-catching neon sign with the word 'Kredietbank' appeared. This was followed by the KB logo, and in 1998, the honour went to the KBC logo.

Another iconic image etched in the collective memory of Antwerp locals is the large block letter A that appeared atop the spire at the beginning of this century. This was to mark the special occasion of the magical year 2001: *Fashion 2001 Landed-Geland* (Year of Fashion), when Walter Van Beirendonck placed a simple 'A' there as the crowning glory of Antwerp's heritage. It was a prelude to what was about to happen in the city in 2002: the opening of the ModeNatie building on Nationalestraat. It was a playful way to let everyone in Antwerp and far beyond know that the world of fashion had definitely found a home here.

Just three years later, the Farmers' Tower came into the spotlight once more, when Antwerp was awarded the title of World Book City in 2004. KBC's logo on the Meirbrug side was temporarily replaced with the letters 'ABC'. As the metropolis' first city poet, Tom Lanoye wrote a beautiful poem on a 650-square-metre banner, stunningly designed by Gert Dooreman. It was a moving declaration of love about the impossible love between the Farmers' Tower and the Cathedral of Our Lady's tower. Later, Tom Lanoye recited the poem on Groenplaats, accompanied by the singer of 'Oh Lieve Vrouwe Toren', La Esterella. When Antwerp's World Book City year drew to a close, the canvas banner was sold piece by piece, or rather letter by letter. To this day, the letter 'H' still adorns the façade of the famous café 't Heilig Huisken in Kloosterstraat.

Tanguy Ottomer

Unlikely lift accident

Friday, 26 June 1959. A summer's day. Almost holiday time and very nearly a national disaster. The front pages of the newspapers ran the headline: 'Lift crashed in Antwerp Tower Building with 24 young visitors inside.' Yes, indeed, the fears of so many early Tower residents had materialised: the lift in the Farmers' Tower had crashed.

On that day, a school from Vlimmeren (Beerse) was visiting the tower. Former pupils recalled much later that there had been a brief discussion between the teacher and the lift boy about whether they were all allowed to use the lift at the same time, being such a large group. But that wouldn't be a problem; the lifts would be able to handle the weight.

They were almost at the Panorama Room when the lift slowed, stalled and then started falling. Through the safety pins, which were probably lubricated too much. Finally, the lift fell to the basement, bounced back up to the fourth floor – unbelievable but true – and then crashed to a halt in the basement. One by one, the schoolboys were extracted from the lift on stretchers. Miraculously, no one was seriously injured.

What had gone wrong? It's still not clear. The maximum weight of the lift had not been exceeded by any means. Former pupil Jos still felt a bit uncomfortable over sixty years later whenever he had to use a lift. But most of all, he had a crazy story to tell: 'It could have been a lot worse! We could all have died. Falling from a height of 80 metres! You know, if anyone in our company ever boasts, we shrug and say: that's nothing; we fell off the Farmers' Tower. But they don't usually believe us!'

Paul Verbraeken

'The very first skyscraper is starting to lean and sink!'

A story told by Mariëtte Ottomer

Every year, my grandmother, Mariëtte Ottomer (1919-2018), recalled the best April Fool prank ever. It was 1930, when the Farmers' Tower in Antwerp was still under construction and only the imposing metal skeleton dominated the city. The headlines screamed: 'The very first skyscraper is starting to lean and sink!' Everyone was talking about it, she told me with a smile. You just had to pass on the incredible news as soon as you bumped into someone in the street, in the hallway or at the bakery.

Without hesitation, curious Antwerp locals made their way to Meirbrug to see for themselves how the impressive tower was slowly but surely sinking at an angle. The streets filled with a crowd staring in excitement at the metal giant. It was an unprecedented spectacle in the otherwise quiet city.

Much to the public's surprise, the whole show turned out to be a cleverly devised April Fool prank. The Farmers' Tower was not sinking at all; it was just a brilliant ruse to fool the people of Antwerp. Meirbrug was crammed with people who had gathered to witness the so-called disaster.

Despite the fact there was no Internet or mobile phones, news of the prank spread through the city like wildfire. It was a time when people came together in person to be part of this kind of collective experience. Hilarity filled the air as the city dwellers realised they had been fooled en masse.

And so the 1930 April Fool prank about the Farmers' Tower became a legendary story, retold every year. After that, no prank could match the genius that took Antwerp by surprise at the time.

Tanguy Ottomer

Love in the Farmers' Tower

For two Kredietbank employees, the Farmers' Tower had a very special significance. In 1952, 23-year-old Hugo Hùwels started working for the bank as Director Mathijssen's chauffeur. 'I was given a fancy grey uniform. The trousers always had to be immaculately pressed. I was also given gloves, but I soon abandoned them.' In the evening, Hugo always waited in front of Director Mathijssen's office to take him home. And that's how the young driver got to know Simonne.

Simonne Bultheel, from Zwijndrecht, worked in the Accounting Department. 'It was a big department with about sixty women. We mainly had to type up and update customer files. At the end of the day, I often had to go downstairs with documents to get them signed off by Mr Mathijssen,' Simonne explained.

'Is Mr Mathijssen free?' Simonne always asked Hugo. One day, he plucked up the courage and replied, 'The director isn't free, but I am.' Certainly not the most inspired attempt at flirting, but certainly a successful one. The couple got married in 1953. They had four children. Zwijndrecht became their home. 'For me, Linkeroever cannot match Rechter-oever,' proud Antwerp resident Hugo exclaims. 'But from Linkeroever, you do have a view of Antwerp's skyline. And it is impossible to imagine without the Farmers' Tower.'

Paul Verbraeken

5

**BYE
BYE
FARMERS'
TOWER?
1962 —
1976**

DEATH SENTENCE FOR A GIANT

It's hard to imagine Antwerp without its familiar Farmers' Tower. And yet, in the late 1960s, it almost disappeared. If it had been up to the Kredietbank's board, today the Antwerp skyline would be adorned by a completely new landmark.

In the winter of 1967, rumours were thick on the ground in Antwerp. The familiar Farmers' Tower was to disappear. The iconic building would have to make way for an entirely new banking complex. 'Death sentence for a giant', was the dramatic headline run by the *Zondagmorgen* weekly newspaper on its front page. What was going on? Were the rumours true? And why did Kredietbank want to mess around with an essential Antwerp landmark?

Kredietbank held a press conference to clarify the matter. The entire Belgian press was invited. As were a number of key representatives at the city, provincial and national levels. The programme included an explanation by the bank's board of directors of the planned works to the Tower, a discussion with architect Paul De Meyer on the technology and aesthetics behind the complete renovation, followed by – that's how it went in those days – cocktails.

The press conference was an attempt by Kredietbank to win over public opinion and the authorities concerned. And that was not going to be easy. Kredietbank wanted to dismantle the existing Farmers' Tower. Leaving only the foundations and steel skeleton frame. First-class architects Léon Stynen and Paul De Meyer designed a completely new complex around it which was also expanded considerably along Eiermarkt and Beddenstraat. Meanwhile, the bank had acquired all the remaining buildings and plots of land.

Stynen and De Meyer's preliminary designs were completely different from the existing Farmers' Tower. Art Deco architecture had to give way to an understated, modernist style and sleek grid patterns. The new tower would also have an extra floor and appear even taller as a result of optical interventions. In the existing Farmers' Tower, the tower section narrowed from the twentieth floor upwards and the side buildings were nine floors high. The preliminary designs depicted a new building with a full-square tower section and lower side buildings. As a result, a narrower-looking tower appeared to rise even higher above the wider, lower section.

A new building on the site of the Farmers' Tower, how on earth did Kredietbank come up with the idea? Why mess around with such an iconic landmark?

'UNWIELDY MONSTROSITY'

Kredietbank had outgrown the Farmers' Tower. The economic revival of the 1950s and the golden years of the 1960s resulted in rapid expansion of the Belgian banking sector. Kredietbank had also expanded considerably. The bank opened new branches everywhere and offered more services to its rapidly growing customer base. More space was needed in the Farmers' Tower to serve local customers as well as to provide umbrella services for customers and offices in the city and province of Antwerp.

Moreover, the offices in the Farmers' Tower no longer met the required standards. The following, among other things, were in need of renovation: 'plumbing, electricity, central heating, telephony, mechanical ventilation, etc.' Moreover, the bank wanted to install 'electromechanical computing equipment'. Out of necessity, various services were also spread around the Farmers' Tower. Organising it this way would make everything a lot more efficient.

And then there was the problem of the Farmers' Tower's image. In the eyes of some members of the bank's board, the Farmers' Tower was a 'dragon', an 'unwieldy monstrosity'. After all, the days of Art Deco were over. Kredietbank wanted innovative architecture to appear 'contemporary' or 'fashionable' and exude 'modern efficiency'. 'Kredietbank's dynamism and daring approach must also be reflected in our public image,' Kredietbank President Luc Wauters explained to his staff. 'Our buildings, our interiors, play a role in this regard, and this should not be underestimated.'

What's more, the Farmers' Tower, now 30 years old, was beginning to show the first serious signs of old age. The cost of continuously patching it up increased year on year. Larger-scale maintenance work was urgently required. All the windows had to be replaced, as did the heaters and power lines. The façade looked battered: blackened by exhaust fumes and air pollution, the scars of the V-bomb still clearly visible. In the early 1960s, it was clear to Kredietbank that they had to find a solution for their branch in the centre of Antwerp. Was a move on the horizon? Should they demolish it and start over? Or renovate it? For a large company like Kredietbank, such weighty decisions are always particularly complex. The great symbolic value of the Farmers' Tower and the skyscraper's landmark status meant that taking an optimal decision was that much tougher.



The Farmers' Tower blackened by exhaust fumes, c.1960
ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION



Léon Stynen and Paul De Meyer
Photomontage of the model of the selected design, 1968
ANTWERP, FLANDERS ARCHITECTURE INSTITUTE

DEMOLISH IT OR MOVE?

Moving was never really an option for Kredietbank. 'It's unthinkable!' echoed the board. Although the Theatre Building on Leien and the World Trade Centre at Central Station did circulate very briefly as possible contingency sites. But the Farmers' Tower had far too much symbolic significance for the institution. The building represented the close ties between Kredietbank and Antwerp, the Flemish port city, economic powerhouse and financial hub par excellence. On top of that, Kredietbank's board assumed that 'a monstrosity' like the Farmers' Tower could only be sold at a bargain price.

So was it a question of demolishing the existing building and building a completely new tower? Similar to the idea of moving, that drastic course of action only seemed like an option very briefly in the early 1960s. Constructing a new building was simpler than renovating in structural terms. Starting from scratch also offered many advantages. It would allow Kredietbank to fully furnish the new building as it wanted, without having to take into account the existing situation. For example, there were only a limited number of elevator shafts in the Farmers' Tower. That was fine for a residential tower where people only take the elevator a few times a day. However, the situation was anything but ideal for an office in which hundreds of staff had to be able to move seamlessly between the different floors.

Nevertheless, the advantages of a new building did not outweigh the many disadvantages. Demolishing the vast Farmers' Tower and building an entirely new skyscraper right in the middle of Antwerp's busy city centre would be an extremely expensive undertaking. Moreover, dismantling the steel structure was certainly no mean feat from a structural-engineering point of view and involved major risks. Lastly, it would also take far too long to start from scratch. All the while, services from the demolished building would have to be housed somewhere else. Moreover, Kredietbank was not sure that a new building would be allowed to be as tall as the existing Farmers' Tower. An unofficial regulation currently applied in the city centre limiting the height of new buildings in the historic centre to seven floors.

OR JUST RENOVATE IT?

Back in 1962, Kredietbank decided to renovate and expand the Farmers' Tower. How thoroughly the existing complex would be tackled was the subject of years of contemplation and debate. First internally, but in the late 1960s, Kredietbank brought in Léon Stynen and Paul De Meyer. The renowned Antwerp architectural duo adopted a rather drastic approach. Their idea of renovation was to completely strip the Farmers' Tower down to its steel structure and fully enhance it.

Stynen and De Meyer's designs totally satisfied the expectations of the bank's board. 'Business-like', 'bold', 'modern': the board sounded pleased. Completely in line with the image Kredietbank wanted to project. Moreover, the old section to be renovated along Schoenmarkt and the completely new section to be built on Eiermarkt would be aesthetically pleasing. This meant Kredietbank would satisfy one of the city-council's urban-planning guidelines. The task was now to convince the rest of Antwerp and the surrounding area.

The press conference held by Kredietbank had an effect. Afterwards, most newspapers were particularly positive about the aesthetics. Newspapers such as *Gazet Van Antwerpen* even praised the 'rejuvenating effect' it afforded the Farmers' Tower. The intervention would make the 'view of Antwerp' look much 'younger and more beautiful'. The newspaper also quoted Antwerp's College of Aldermen and the Public Works Department: the preliminary designs were 'stunning' and would 'certainly enhance the cityscape'.

But by no means did all the press outlets readily adopt Kredietbank's discourse. 'Half a billion Belgian francs for an ill-conceived project,' *De Post* scathingly summed up the renovation and expansion plans. 'The new project imposed on Antwerp' would be more than 100 high and thus 'even more of an eyesore'. Moreover, the weekly newspaper accused the bank's board and architects of having 'not the slightest idea about neighbourhood sociology, urbanisation and other modern urban problems'. For example, not nearly enough parking spaces were provided for the thousands of employees and visitors who would drive to the renovated complex each day. A criticism that a lot of press outlets shared, including those that favoured the project as a whole.





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FRONT COVER

The completed steel frame of the Tower Building,
seen from the building of Eagle, Star & British Dominions
Insurance Company Ltd, c.1930

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BACK COVER

A labourer on the far end of the steel structure, c.1930

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