

Bricks of wrath: (Re)building the *IJzertoren* memorial (1925–1930 and 1952–1965)

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ABSTRACT: Between 1925 and 1929, the *IJzertoren* [Yser tower] memorial was built on the Yser river bank in the Belgian town Dixmude. Both war memorial and monument to Flanders' struggle for political emancipation, the tower became an increasingly charged and divisive symbol in interwar Belgium, and its construction was highly ideologized. This situation, exacerbated by the tower's associations with collaborationism in the next war, would ultimately lead to its intentional destruction in 1946 under suspicious circumstances. The subsequent questions, if, how and by whom the tower should be reconstructed, refueled these debates. Despite ambitious reconstruction plans, the memorial was eventually rebuilt between 1952 and 1965 as a slightly modified and upscaled replica of the old tower, an approach that deliberately rejected modern design references or construction methods. The lengthy construction process itself was operationalized in propaganda and iconography of the annual Flemish nationalist rallies that were staged on the building site.

1 INTRODUCTION

At 2:15 a.m. on 16 March 1946, the rural town of Dixmude was startled by the crackling noise from a heavy explosion on the banks of the Yser River, just west of the town center. In the early morning light, after the dust had settled, a crumbled pile of bricks and concrete (Figure 1) was all that remained of the once 52-meters tall *IJzertoren* [Yser tower], a peace memorial to Flemish soldiers fallen during the Great War, but at the same time a monument to Flanders' struggle for emancipation within the Belgian nation and a rally point of the Flemish nationalist movement. Its intentional destruction was the chronicle of a death foretold, after an earlier attempt on 16 June one year earlier. Although unsuccessful, this first assault nevertheless punched a 2×20 meter hole in the façade. Moreover, the integrity of the monument's concrete



Figure 1. Ruins of the dynamited *IJzertoren*, 1946 (ADVN).

structure and foundations was severely compromised by the impact of the blast. A judicial and parliamentary inquiry until deep in 1951 was unable to bring the perpetrators to trial, let alone identify those responsible (s.n. 1952b). However, the professionalism of the attack (the explosive charges were placed in such a way that the tower collapsed vertically without doing further damage to adjacent property) was evident from the very start of the inquiry, hinting towards the involvement of the nearby stationed Belgian military demining service. In retrospect, sufficient evidence exists to credit Belgicist factions in the army with the responsibility, possibly in alliance with remnants of right-wing wartime resistance cells (De Wever 2008). Such insights are opposed to the widely propagated view in Flemish nationalist circles at the time, who recognized in the attack the hand of the Belgian state, wanting to break the backbone of the Flemish movement because of its collaborationist entanglement during the Second World War. A commemorative plaque on the preserved rubble of the tower thus states: "On March 16, 1946, this tower was dynamited and pulled down skillfully, efficiently, anonymously, but yet known." In the Flemish nationalist rhetoric, the war monument had become a victim of war, in its own right.

2 A DIVISIVE MONUMENT

To understand the impact of the *IJzertoren*'s divisive symbolism, leading ultimately to the assaults of 1945–6 and to come to grips with the monument's

multi-layered meanings and present-day connotations, we need to outline briefly how the monument's history is intertwined with the rise of this Flemish nationalism (Shelby 2014). The Flemish Movement developed from a late-19th-century cultural phenomenon into an active political and Catholic movement (the *Frontbeweging*) in the trenches of the First World War. Dixmude, at the easternmost edge of the Belgian sector of the Western Front, subsequently became the epicenter of the veneration of the perished, especially of those who had allegedly died as martyrs for the Flemish cause or had struggled for cultural emancipation against the French-speaking military elite. In this spirit, an annual pilgrimage to the graves of the Yser (*IJzerbedevaart*) was organized from 1920 onwards by a group of likeminded war veterans, whose core consisted of members of the aforementioned *Frontbeweging*. The following years saw an exponential growth of the number of participants, tens of thousands by 1930 (Figure 2), as well as an increasing tension between, on one hand, the commemorative anti-war message that the manifestations wanted to express, and, on the other hand, the political agenda of anti-Belgian and Catholic Flemish nationalism.

The story is well-documented (Seberechts 2003; Shelby 2014). The success of the annual pilgrimages necessitated the acquisition of a large private (as to escape control of the Belgian authorities) terrain, which was ultimately found on the banks of the Yser. The terrain overlooked the former front landscape and was in close proximity to the hard-fought Dixmude flour mills and Trench of Death, both important symbolic locations of Belgium's war loss and grief. Here, the *Heldenhuldezerken* [Heroes' tombstones] that had been placed from 1916 onwards on the war graves of Flemish soldiers without the consent of the Belgian authorities, could be collected and relocated. These stones were, in the early 1920s, replaced by official Belgian gravestones. The Belgian state had already started to reduce some of the wartime stones to gravel for military road construction, an event that was extensively exploited in Flemish nationalist propaganda.

A plan by the Province of West Flanders to erect a *Doodentoren* [Tower for the Dead], a monument to all Belgian victims on a nearby site, gave the impetus to the Yser pilgrimage committee's plans for its own privately sponsored monument to all Flemish soldiers, for which a design competition was held in July 1925. As the plans for the *Doodentoren* became more and more clear, the ambitions of the committee grew. Initially the committee conceived of a monument measuring a mere eight to ten meters in height. By the time of the competition however, a monument of 15 to 20 meters was envisioned. From 39 proposals, the jury selected the design by the young brothers Robert and Fritz Van Averebeke from Antwerp, both sons of the well-known liberal and Flemish-oriented Art Nouveau architect Emiel Van Averebeke. Their design, a monolithic bluestone stele topped with a cross, was inspired by the shape of the



Figure 2. Building site of the first IJzertoren during the annual pilgrimage of 1929 (ADV N).

Heldenhuldezerk, which was an explicit requirement in the competition brief. The cross prominently featured the slogan of the Catholic Flemish Movement AVV-VVK, short for *Alles Voor Vlaanderen – Vlaanderen Voor Kristus* [All for Flanders – Flanders for Christ].

To compete with the threat of *Doodentoren* (later effectively sabotaged by members of the pilgrimage committee in the provincial council), the height of the IJzertoren design was raised at several intervals during 1925. By the time of tendering in 1927, contractors were asked to make an offer for three variants with a height of 30, 35 and 40 meters, whereas the foundation was calculated on 40 meters. This enlargement necessitated considerable modifications to the initial design, materiality and structural concept. To save weight on the pile foundations, the tower now became a hollow structure. This in turn allowed for the tower to become accessible, offering space for a small exhibition in its base as well as a panoramic view on the former front landscape from a terrace on the top. Since bluestone became too costly on this scale, other alternatives were proposed, such as simili-plastered brick and exposed concrete (as was the case in the Ossuaire of Douaumont, one of the committee's reference projects). The final choice for a brick-clad framework in reinforced concrete was accepted only reluctantly and on the condition that cost savings on material would allow for a tower that would reach its final height of 52 meters, as a testimony of the committee's architectural priorities: "Preferably no bricks, as they look so modest. [...] But a fifty-meters tall tower will sound better and make a stronger impression over the centuries than a beautiful bluestone ten-meters tall monument" (ADV N Y714/2/6). The encapsulation of the concrete structure in the brickwork is unsurprising at a time when reinforced concrete as a material was still balancing between "mud" and "modern" (Forty 2012). With the exception of a few modernist diversions that explicitly used exposed concrete, postwar reconstruction in Flanders would generally tend towards a *vieux-neuf* approach in which, for instance, a reinforced concrete structure could be seamlessly integrated in a neo-Gothic building envelope. Nevertheless, the resulting image of the IJzertoren was that of a robust brick



Figure 3. The completed first IJzertoren, 1934 (ADV N).

tower, reminiscent of the sturdy medieval brick towers of the area, albeit in a modernist architectural language that seemed to be borrowed from the Amsterdam School, not unlike, for instance, Huib Hoste's brick *Belgenmonument* in Amersfoort (1917–8). In turn, the tower-like appearance that the IJzertoren had gradually adopted, was shared with other war monuments of the time, such as Jos Smolderen's 1923 International Memorial in Liège or Eduard Van Steenberghe's design for a "Monument Flanders for The Netherlands" from 1928 (s.n. 2020a).

After the design had taken its final shape, a technical board with committee members and engineers Jan De Bondt, Honoré Van der Ghote and Albert Mallebrancke was installed (ADV N Y714/2/6). The board relieved the Van Averbekes and was responsible for some rationalization in the design. They also took care of the study of the reinforced concrete and the day-to-day follow-up of the construction site, together with contractor De Tandt.

The pilgrimage committee, sensitive as ever to symbolism, decided to reuse the remaining *Heldenhuldezerken* in the construction of the tower base, a solution that also intended to save them from destruction. After the completion of construction in 1929 (the ceremony of the last stone having included the integration of remains of the crushed *Heldenhuldezerken* in the top of the tower) and its inauguration during the tenth pilgrimage of 1930 (which was disturbed by riots and an aircraft that dropped leaflets on the pilgrims who were labelled traitors), several

new steps were undertaken to charge the tower with additional symbolic meanings. An underground crypt was added between the foundation walls of the tower base. It would hold the bodies of nine alleged martyrs of the Flemish cause, the so-called *IJzersymbolen* [Yser symbols], as well as other material relics that took up a central position in the Flemish nationalist reading of the war events, among them a sink stone from the village of Merkem, on which soldiers had written "Here our blood, when our right?" Between 1931 and 1934, the four tower buttresses were clad with monumental concrete bas-relief sculptures by the expressionist sculptor Karel Aubroeck, the winner of an additional competition (Figure 3). These statues represented, again, some of the *IJzersymbolen*.

During the Second World War, the IJzertoren was physically damaged: it was affected by the bombing of nearby bridges and, after being modified to accommodate the installation of machine guns, it was further struck by a British aerial bomb in May 1940. But most importantly it became morally compromised by the continuation, albeit in a reduced form, of the annual pilgrimages that now had become unabashed manifestations of collaboration, ever since right-wing groups within the committee had continued to gain influence over pacifist members during the late 1930s. In the climate of repression and political crisis that deeply divided Belgium immediately after the Second World War, the IJzertoren and its self-confident (but now compromised) rhetoric acted as a lightning rod for patriotic and unitarian sentiment, making it an easy target for acts of physical vandalism and destruction.

3 AN UNMODERN RECONSTRUCTION

Following the destruction of the tower and taking advantage of the immediate postwar bewilderment among the Flemish movement, attempts were made by the local municipality of Dixmude, as well as by the Belgian Government and associations of war veterans, to expropriate and nationalize the site of the memorial. Proposals to create a cemetery for allied soldiers or a monument to the heroes of both world wars were met with such fierce resistance in Flanders, that they were abolished (Seberechts 2003).

In the course of 1949, a monumental arch was erected from the rubble of the tower and the remnants of Aubroeck's statues. The arch was designed by artist Karel De Bondt together with his brother Jan, who had been a member of the technical advisory board in the construction of the IJzertoren. The so-called "Pax gate" reiterated the De Bondts' 1933 design strategy for a monument to the Van Raemdonck brothers and Aimé Fiévez (three prominent *IJzersymbolen*) near Ypres, which had been built from concrete fragments of a nearby German strongpoint (Decoodt 2020). After clearing the debris, the ruins of the IJzertoren were consolidated to create a new memorial ensemble with the restored crypt and the arch.

Amidst all these events, a new debate centered around the issue on what a rebuilt tower should look like. As early as 1948, the Belgian modernist architect Huib Hoste inquired with the committee about a possible survey of the site: “not only to let my thoughts ...but also my pencil wander about the new tower,” a question he repeated in late 1951 (ADV N Y104/1). In the same letter Hoste expressed his criticism of the highly contested reconstruction proposal by Clement Van Himbeek, professor in civil engineering at the Catholic University of Leuven and counselor of the pilgrimage committee. In Van Himbeek’s vision, the new tower, 350 meters high and entirely made of reinforced concrete, would be crowned with a six-to-ten-story cross that could accommodate a museum, a congress center and a scientific institute. Vaguely reminiscent of Giacomo Mattè-Trucco’s Fiat factory in Lingotto, Turin (1914–22), and well ahead of Abraham Lipski’s Parking 58 in Brussels (1956–7), the entire tower was made accessible to motorcars and buses by means of a double helicoidal ramp, measuring 4857 meters in length and ending in a multi-storey car park (Figure 4). Turning points and lookout platforms were provided every five windings. Making use of an ascending working platform and slip forming techniques, Van Himbeek calculated that the new tower would rise at a continuous speed of 20 centimeters per day.

Much against his will, Van Himbeek’s ambitious plan was made public by the Flemish Catholic student association KVHV (*Katholiek Vlaams Hoogstudentenverbond*), instigating a fierce debate between advocates and opponents in academic, architectural and Flemish nationalist circles. In a 1952 booklet, the KVHV published details of the plan and bundled “ideological, technical, financial and aesthetic” arguments pro and contra, together with some of the opposing opinions as quoted by propagators of the Flemish movement (s.n. 1952a). Among the critics were Robert Van Averbek, who compared the design to “an American tower building” and a “Tower of Babel”, and Karel Aubroeck who declared that “greatness, beauty and monumentality cannot be derived from size: those can harm and destroy beauty and proportions.” This vision was contested by those who saw the reconstruction as an opportunity to reaffirm Flanders’ resilience and self-confidence in the face of the injustice that had been its part in the immediate postwar years.

Interestingly, most objections against the Van Himbeek plan were not so much directed against the technical or financial feasibility of the project, but rather against its radical modern stance and functionalist approach. Many of the critics were horrified by the prospect of a meaningless television mast of the likes that were popping up everywhere, such as Gustave Magnel’s proposed 635-meters tall television tower in Brussels. Furthermore, the plan’s embracing of the new postwar reality of car mobility and mass tourism constituted to many critics an impermissible profanizing of the IJzertoren’s initial intentions. Aubroeck, for instance, noted that “to him [i.e. Van Himbeek],

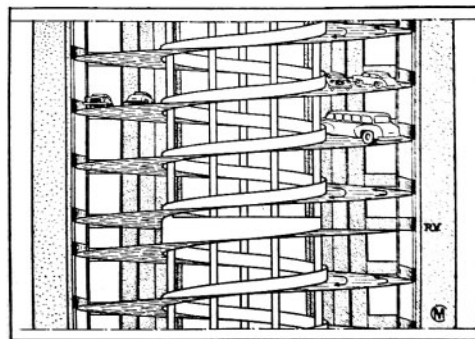


Figure 4. Proposal for a reconstructed IJzertoren by Clement Van Himbeek, partial cross section (s.n. 1952a).

everything is just function, matter and engineering. [...] It indeed remains some impressive engineering – but ever since the engineers have come with their tensioning force, ‘beauty’ is on the run and is nowhere to be found on the site” (ADV N Y56/1/1). Publisher Joris Lannoo adds: “Advise the designers of [this] tower to overlook the ground it’s standing on. [...] If they would only realize what happened on that ground, they would think piously and devoutly of the heavily wounded and killed, rather than of a skyscraper.” His writing includes a 1917 aerial picture of the front landscape mutilated beyond recognition, on the back of which is written laconically: “Top left (on the location of the soap factory) is now the IJzertoren” (ADV N Y56/1/1).

But the proposal’s materiality and construction method were also food for disapproval. Aubroeck, apart from warning about the extensive use of reinforced concrete, which he considered, judging from his own experience in monumental concrete sculptures, an inferior and unsustainable building material, also rejected the use of machine-produced bricks, as were widely used in the old tower “because of budgetary restrictions.” Noting that Flanders has been a land of tower builders since the Middle Ages, he dismissed industrial building processes and wanted the reconstructed *IJzertoren* to reconnect with this ancient craftsmanship and tradition. After summing up examples in the surrounding area of the “deeply rooted” medieval brick towers that, “like all great architecture, rely solely on their loadbearing and supportive capacities,” Aubroeck concluded: “May they build like our ancestors did; and may they rebuild it as it has been before” (ADV N Y56/1/1).

To put an end to all debates on the reconstruction, the pilgrimage committee, asked four architects (Robert Van Averbek, Jan-Albert De Bondt, Jan Lauwers and the unfortunate Clement Van Himbeek) to prepare a sketch for a new monument, 80 to 100 meters in height, and preserving the silhouette of the old tower (ADV N Y104/1). In its meeting of 9 February 1952, the committee, obviously choosing the path of least resistance, commissioned Van Averbek to draw out the new plans (ADV N Y57/1/4). The reworked design was an upscaled replica of the old tower; only

the proportions of the top cross and the tower base were modified (ADV N Y72/1/4).

Given the difficulties to collect the necessary funding for the construction through crowdfunding, a slow and phased building process was envisioned. Resorting under the regulations of war damage and reconstruction, the new memorial was subject to a partial financial compensation from the Belgian Government. The amount of compensation was fixed only in 1961, after a long discussion with the ministry of reconstruction as to the value of the destroyed tower; a debate that centered around the cost that might have been saved if the pile foundation of the old tower had been reused. The discussion was only settled after a technical report, again by Clement Van Himbeeck, on the impact of the 1946 blast on the pile foundation (ADV N Y73/3). In the end, the construction of the new tower, without its interior finishing and elevator, would last over 13 years. Work was interrupted and continued as the necessary funding was gathered, and the tower was not inaugurated until the pilgrimage of 1965.

This lengthy construction process had two immediate consequences. First, it allowed for earlier design decisions to be questioned again by the pilgrimage committee, resulting in numerous discussions and tensions between the committee, Van Averbek, engineer Amaat Monthaye and contractor Lode Van Der Kinderen. This was most evident in the last and most difficult stage of the construction, leading up to the cross on top of the tower. In a letter to Van Averbek from 20 February 1963, just prior to the start of the works on the upper floors, the committee expressed its dissatisfaction with the then current design: "It doesn't have the tough and robust looks of the old tower. Still, much can be saved if we build the cross on top correctly" (ADV N Y74/2/1). The committee then asked to enlarge the proportions of the cross, and at the same time to reduce the concrete structure and all unnecessary floors in the upper part, so that a panoramic room with large windows could be integrated (initially, only a terrace was planned and the windows in the cross were to be integrated in the letters AVV-VVK). What followed was an endless stream of discussion with the contractor and a nauseating series of reworked designs for the upper part (Figure 5), that would only take its definitive shape with large cross-shaped panoramic windows in late November 1963, when work on the floor just below had already started (ADV N Y74/2/1).

Second, the slow construction forced contractor Van Der Kinderen to come up with creative solutions that would allow for long disruptions of the work, also in terms of cost efficiency and equipment on the building site. The private photo archive of foreman Karel Canfyn is a testimony to what measures were taken to achieve these goals, mostly by resorting to manual labor, craftsmanship and small-scale prefabrication on the building site itself. This attitude, unsuited for a mid-century high-rise tower, fitted surprisingly well in the pilgrimage committee's rhetoric and complemented

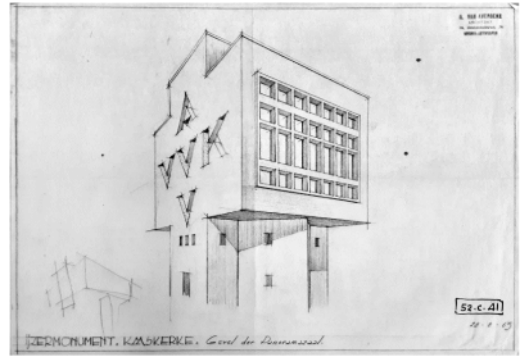


Figure 5. Intermediate design of the cross, 1963 (ADV N).



Figure 6. Prefabricated corner elements in place, ca. 1961 (Collection Karel Canfyn).

Karel Aubroeck's earlier observations on the virtues of craftsmanship and vernacular construction.

One example of this approach is the method that was developed to position the brickwork of the tower shaft, a rather complex process considering the tapered cross section of the tower combined with its polygonal floor plan. The devised solution was a series of V-shaped molds that represented the different angles in the outline of the ground plan. In this formwork, bricks were arranged in the desired bond and covered with a thin layer of concrete. Wooden slats in the joints provided perfect positioning of the bricks and prevented filling up the joints with concrete. Once these carefully labelled pinnacles had been placed in position on the floor under construction (Figure 6), the remaining gaps could then be filled in with brickwork and finished on the inside with a layer of cement plaster. Similar to the construction of the old tower, the whole then served as a lost formwork for the actual solid concrete walls (Workum 1934). The connection between brickwork and concrete was further assured by the inclusion of protruding flipped bricks, resulting in a truly hybrid construction of bricks and concrete. The tiny windows in the tower shaft were prefabricated as brick frames in a similar way. Another example of this approach is the contractor's proposal for the cantilevering arms of the cross, positioned at an altitude of 69.50 meters above ground level (Figure 7). Whereas exten-



Figure 7. Trusses forming the arms of the cross; prefabricated brick-and-concrete slabs, ca. 1964 (Collection Karel Canfyn).

sive scaffolding and a working platform had been used in the construction of the first tower, the contractor now proposed to use preassembled steel trusses, to which brick-and concrete slabs were anchored. These trusses later served as reinforcement for the 150-centimeters high concrete beams that supported the entire cross.

The organic genesis of the rebuilt IJzertoren and the mutual interaction between its design and construction manifested itself in an unusual relationship between the commissioner, the architect and the contractor with a shared ideology as common denominator. A resolute and well-advised pilgrimage committee would not hesitate to intervene in issues that were traditionally reserved for architects and engineers; a contractor whose duties went beyond the mere execution of the plan, and an architect who saw himself confronted with a career-spanning project and a construction method that was to be retrofitted in a design nearly three decades old. Lightyears removed from Van Himbeek's scheme, with its mechanized growth of 20 centimeters per day, the slow building process was entirely in the "fourteen hands that built the tower" (s.n.; s.d.). Many years later, in his twofold description of the construction method for the Zeebrugge Sea Trade Center project, Rem Koolhaas rephrased the challenge: "In the first case, sudden erection would become *spectacular*; in the second almost imperceptible progress a potential source of *suspense*: the workers would visibly age during the course of construction; children would become adults as the building stubbornly remained unfinished" (Koolhaas et al. 1998).

4 AN IDEOLOGIZED BUILDING SITE

An indirect consequence of the slow-going building process was the opportunity to tailor the planning of the building site to the pace of the annual pilgrimages. This allowed the committee to operationalize the construction site in its Flemish nationalist rhetoric and mold it into the iconography of the pilgrimages. This operationalization worked on different levels. Most obviously, the memorial (both in its original shape and its reconstruction) had been literally erected

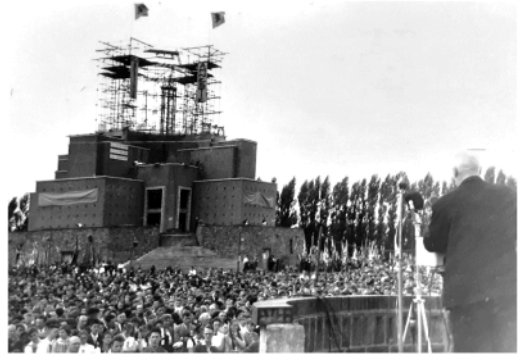


Figure 8. Building site during the pilgrimage, 1958 (ADV N).

from symbolically charged materials. Be it the blood-stained earth that held the tower, or the reuse of the *Heldenhuldezerken* in the tower base, or the subsequent adorning with monumental statues or even the reuse of the debris in the arch: time after time the pilgrimage committee succeeded in charging built matter with additional layers of meaning.

Hosting the martyrs' bodies and the relics of the *IJzersymbolen*, the tower "transubstantiated" through the Christian-inspired rites that took place during the annual pilgrimages.

Moreover, the building site played a crucial role as stage and pulpit during successive pilgrimages (see also Figures 2, 8), and the design of the second tower incorporated this need. Van Averbek pointed out to the committee: "May I establish your attention to the four platforms that are located in front of every entrance [...]: they offer the potential to place *Sprechgesänge* or choirs during festivities" (ADV N 74/2/1). In other instances, the construction site presented itself as décor for choreographic performances or as a canvas for banners with political slogans (adopting the language of the contractor's and architect's prominent nameplates, see Figure 8).

Milestones in the construction process were photographed and published in the committee's communications or gave cause for organized press visits (Figure 9). This happened on significant occasions, such as the groundbreaking or the erection of the maypole upon finishing the top floor, although ceremonial events were also organized on numerous less obvious occasions, such as the geotechnical survey, the canalization of the terrain's drainage system, the driving of the first pile, the completion of the foundation slab, etc. Whenever possible, these ceremonies were matched with the timing of the annual pilgrimages, to become mass-attended and heavily mediatized events. On more than one occasion the contractor was urged to meet certain goals in the construction that could be integrated into the program of the pilgrimages. If this was not feasible, the committee did not hesitate to (re)stage certain events and integrate them in the pilgrimage, sometimes in a symbolic way.



Figure 9. The new tower near completion during the placement of the lettering, ca. 1964 (Collection Karel Canfyn).

The very “vocabulary of the construction site” was activated in the discourse of the pilgrimages. Building cranes, site equipment, scaffolding, scale models and reinforcement bars featured prominently throughout the visual culture of the pilgrimages and Flemish nationalism in general. The construction site of the monument became a familiar image in the iconography (and fundraising campaigns) of the committee, as had also been the case with the first IJzertoren that had appeared frequently in the propaganda films by Clemens De Landtsheer, the committee’s secretary and owner of the film production company Flandria Film. Even fetching the building materials was celebrated, starting from the 1955 pilgrimage. This took place under the slogan “*Vlaanderen brengt stenen aan*” [Flanders offers stones] and culminated in a parade of trucks delivering bricks from all over Flanders. It was a clear signal that the reconstruction of the monument embodied the renewed aspirations of the postwar Flemish movement.

5 CONCLUSION

Whereas the historiography of the IJzertoren has been claimed almost exclusively by scholars of Flemish nationalism and by art historians focusing on the

iconography of the tower’s statues (;e Wever 2008; Seberechts 2003; Shelby 2014), it remains a blind spot in architectural and construction history. This is a remarkable feat, not in the least because the IJzertoren is the only architectural object currently included as such in the attainment targets of Flemish primary education: every 12-year-old is supposed to be familiar with the “acknowledged symbols of the Flemish Community (i.e. its holiday, weapon, anthem, flag and memorial)” (s.n. 2020b). Possibly, its divisive nature, as well as its political and ideological connotations, have prevented a closer inquiry, perhaps even today if we consider the monument’s contested nomination for UNESCO heritage more recently (Van Alstein 2016). Yet, from an architectural and construction history perspective, the IJzertoren presents itself as a valid and layered case that raises several important questions. The memorial invites us to consider the mechanisms through which monuments, and their construction processes, contribute to the formation of national identities (Gillis 1994). In a most explicit way, the IJzertoren reminds us how these identities are not static and shift over time. The violent destruction of the first tower is proof of the monument’s capacity to absorb ideological meaning and nationalist sentiment over time (Allais 2018). The reconstructed IJzertoren, “bigger and better,” has burdened later generations and curators with questions on how to address these issues in a contemporary context, so different from the context in which it was created initially (Van Alstein 2016).

It is impossible to see the IJzertoren and its construction history detached from these connotations. On one hand, all actors in the construction process shared a similar ideological background, and often found one another through their resilient shared social networks. On the other hand, every step in the construction process, from the first pile to the last crowning brick, was to some extent ideologically exploited, or ideologically biased at least. Precisely this aspect constitutes, among other things, the richness of the case and suggests that construction history should not (or cannot) be neutral towards ideology.

However modern in its original shape and architectural language, the destruction of the IJzertoren in 1946 presented the pilgrimage committee with a dilemma. Its reverting to the original 1920’s scheme, despite the availability of a highly charged modern alternative, does not seem to have been based on any kind of rational parameter, but rather on a revival of nationalist sentiments, resulting in a somewhat anachronistic design and an obsolete construction method that nevertheless perfectly matched the rhetoric of the pilgrimage committee. This implies that the interplay between the monument and its commemoration was not a one-way process: nationalist motives bestowed the bricks and concrete of the IJzertoren with ideology. In turn the very act of construction, destruction and reconstruction fueled nationalist rhetoric.

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