

Former Yugoslav Pavilion Wevelgem

- Address: Deken Jonckheerestraat 7, Wevelgem
- Architecture type: pavillion A
- Architects: Vjenceslav Richter
- Style: modernism, expo-style
- Year: 1958
- Region: Kortrijk
- Epoch: after war



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The current school building of the *Sint-Pauluscollege* was designed by celebrated Croatian architect Vjenceslav Richter. The building was designed as the national pavilion of Yugoslavia (modern day Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia) for the 1958 World Fair in Brussels. During the World Fair the pavilion was awarded the gold star award as it was considered the best pavilion among foreign country participants. The architect was even awarded Knight of the Order of the Belgian Crown.

The first part of the exhibition highlighted the evolution of the industry in the country and the resources that were naturally to be found in Yugoslavia like metals. The first gallery introduced the visitor to the history of the country and also contained modern historical events at that time and the ultimate formation of the Yugoslav republic. A second gallery

was dedicated to current social status of the country as of 1958. A third part exhibited artworks by modern Yugoslav artists. This included paintings, sculptures, architecture and applied arts pieces and had to demonstrate the diversity of the country through its art. A final part of the exhibition had to give visitors an idea of the cultural and historical heritage to be found in the country as well as its natural landscapes. The garden surrounding the pavilion also exhibited sculptures, among them the *Nada tower* by Richter himself.

After the World Fair ended the building was sold to Adriaan De Jaegere who was starting a new school at the time in Wevelgem. The building was reconstructed in Wevelgem and adapted by architect Jan De Jaegere to make it function as a school building. In 2005 the building was listed as a protected monument as it was considered an important building for its time. It was also considered important as it is one of the only and best preserved buildings which still exist of the 1958 World Fair. Many pavilions were deconstructed and recycled after the world fair. Some pavilions like Spain and Austria moved back to their own country after the World Fair. Other pavilions were moved within Belgium and reused the same way as the Yugoslav pavilion. Some of these are:

- The Atomium in Brussels.
- Pavilion of town planning: now situated in Kortrijk.
- Canadian Pavilion: now a school building in Genk.
- Pavilion of Belgian Wood industry: now an exhibition hall in Antwerp.
- Pavilion of the Kortrijkse dakpannen- en tegelnijverheid: situated in Brussels next to the atomium.
- IBM pavilion: now a showroom situated in Londerzeel.
- Côte d'Or pavilion: until recently dancing Carré in Willebroek

The 1958 World Fair in Brussels is considered as one of the most important World Fairs and the first successful World fair after the Second World War. At the time it was also the first time both the USA and the USSR (modern day Russia) participated in a global event since the start of the cold war. The architecture of the World Fair influenced Belgian modern architecture which is now known as the "Expo-Style".

The Architect:

Vjenceslav Richter (1917-2002) was one of the most important architects and artists from Yugoslavia. He was also active in other artistic fields such as urbanism, sculpture, graphic arts, painting and stage design. Richter graduated from the University of Zagreb in 1949. Soon after he co-founded EXAT 51, a group of progressive and modern painters and architects from Croatia. Richter was celebrated for his pavilions for important exhibitions and his progressive artworks. Up to this day he is one of the most celebrated architects and artists originating from Croatia. In 2018 he was honoured in the school building in Wevelgem with an exhibition featuring lots of his work to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the former pavilion. In 2020 a new exhibition about the artist and architect was organized by Bozar in Brussels to celebrate Croatia as head of the European Union that year.

The Construction:

The first design of the pavilion foresaw an nearly invisible mast which would elevate the building from the ground. Richter was fascinated by the idea to overcome gravity and tried to incorporate this into his design for the pavilion. The idea wasn't approved by the selection committee because of technical limitations to build the design and the budget. At the World Fair the pavilion was praised for its elegance and simplicity, although the design wasn't as spectacular as the first design.



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The new design would include foundations and a skeleton in steel which would be able to carry the whole building. The Pavilion was accessible from all sides. It consisted of two volumes which were intertwined, resulting in three semi-floors. Because of the usage of the steel skeleton it was possible to work with large amounts of glass windows and have a very open pavilion. When visiting the pavilion at the 1958 world fair visitors would be able to look outside in any direction they were looking at whatever point they were standing. The visual impact of the supporting steel beams was limited because they integrating them in exhibition walls as much as possible. These beams are connected to the roof and gradually get smaller when rising to the roof. The staircases in the open building didn't only make circulation between different floors possible, but also supported the construction next to these beams. The roof of the building consisted out of wood from the country itself as was the marble used in the floor.



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Inside interesting geometrical shapes are formed at intersections with the wooden ceiling. From the outside it looks like two shapes colliding with each other. The ground floor is smaller than the floors of the buildings which creates the illusion that the building is floating. In the façade an interesting interaction between lines and shapes is made which characterizes the building.

The building had to undergo some changes to be able to function as a school. The floors were cast in concrete and the coloured floors of the pavilion were replaced by tiles in a monotone colour. The building now has 12 classrooms, a large study room, two offices, a conference hall and a cinema. The main steel construction is preserved as much as possible. But because of these adaptations the open feeling of the pavilion is gone.

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