

CEMENTING THE TRANSATLANTIC ALLIANCE

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE BELGIAN CHANCERY IN WASHINGTON, D.C. (1945-1957)

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In February 1957, Foreign Minister Paul-Henri Spaak (1899-1972) of the Belgian Socialist Party paid a four-day visit to Washington, D.C. to attend several conferences on atomic energy and economic cooperation¹. As part of his visit, Spaak inaugurated the newly-built Belgian chancery – the office section of an embassy – by giving a speech to the attending members of Washington’s *corps diplomatique* and officials of the US State Department on 9 February 1957. In his speech to these political dignitaries, the foreign minister labelled the new chancery building as “[...] a token of the high regard we Belgians have for the position of the United States in the world. It is a building whose walls will house activities of interest and benefit to all”². Located in the northern suburbs of the American capital, the chancery was a crescent shaped two-storey building with a pitched roof and to a large extent symmetrical composition. The building was covered in limestone and its front façade was characterised by a centrally positioned entrance flanked by a repetitive fenestration pattern. The inauguration of the new Belgian embassy offices coincided with the heydays of the transatlantic alliance between Belgium and the United States.

I. Introduction

From 1947 onwards, Belgian foreign policymakers increasingly aligned themselves with Uncle Sam by joining the Marshall Plan (1947), NATO (1949) and the US led military coalition during the Korean War (1950-1953)³. As the chancery was commissioned against the backdrop of these intensifying bilateral ties, this raises the question to what extent the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs seized the construction of this new chancery as an opportunity to wield architecture as an instrument to further cement this transatlantic alliance. Did the Ministry of Foreign Affairs indeed project political messages on this diplomatic building project as Spaak had indicated during his inauguration speech and if so, how was this translated into the chancery's design?

To shed light on this matter, the current article approaches the building project from three distinct perspectives. Reflecting the growing historical interest for the awarding authority, the first perspective sheds light on the Ministry's inner workings towards commissioning this new chancery. Which incentives prompted Brussels to construct a new chancery on the other side of the Atlantic? Was the building project closely monitored and guided by the Ministry's bureaucratic apparatus and who were the key players involved in greenlighting or possibly thwarting the plans to build a new chancery? In order to identify these main protagonists, this part calls upon an egocentric network analysis – part of the historical social network analysis – which is applied to the correspondence of the Belgian ambassador to

the United States at the time⁴. As such diplomatic building activity takes place in their backyard, ambassadors have traditionally served as key witnesses to reconstruct the historical trajectory of a diplomatic building project⁵.

The second perspective discusses the chancery's architectural features by emphasising representational elements incorporated into the design. Were the architects involved given *carte blanche* in designing the new chancery or did they take their cues from ministry officials? What kind of architecture was deemed as appropriate to represent the Belgian state on American soil and to what extent did this design resonate any political messages? How did this design relate to other diplomatic building projects launched by Belgium at the time? As the aspect of national representation by means of architecture plays a pivotal role in this analysis, this part questions whether the chancery's design was envisioned as a product of cultural diplomacy by the different actors involved. G.R. Berridge and Lorna Lloyd label the concept of cultural diplomacy as “[...] the promotion abroad of a state's cultural achievements with special emphasis often being given to language and the arts but also encompassing science and technology”⁶. Leaving aside the age-old debate whether architecture is first and foremost an art form or rather a science, examining whether the chancery's architecture can be labelled as a product of cultural diplomacy offers an insightful lens to accentuate representational design features.

The third and final perspective sheds light on the chancery as diplomatic work environment.

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2. Newspaper clippings from the *Sunday Star* and the *Washington Post and Times Herald* (Diplomatic Archives of Belgium (hereinafter abbreviated as DAB), 18.434/7 *Papiers R. Silvercruys*, 10 February 1957).

3. MARK VAN DEN WIJNGAERT AND LIEVE BEULLENS (eds.), *Oost West, West Best : België onder de Koude Oorlog, 1947-1989*, Tielt, 1997, p. 53-54; RIK COOLSAET, *La Belgique dans l'OTAN (1949-2009)*, Bruxelles, 2008, p. 10-11; KRISTOF SMEYERS AND ERIK BUYST, *Het Gestolde Land. Een Economische Geschiedenis van België*, Kalmthout, 2016, p. 140.

4. CHARLES WETHERELL, “Historical Social Network Analysis”, In *International Review of Social History*, nr. 43, 1998 (6), p. 127-128.

5. JANE C. LOEFFLER, *The Architecture of Diplomacy: Building America's Embassies*, New York, 2011, p. 67.

6. G.R. BERRIDGE AND LORNA LLOYD, *The Palgrave Macmillan Dictionary of Diplomacy*, Basingstoke, 2012, p. 87-88.



The Belgian chancery's façade as seen from Garfield Street (Hagley Museum and Library, John McShain Papers, late 1956).

What kind of office space planning did the architects involved have in store for the Belgian diplomatic staff posted in Washington, D.C. and how did this spatial layout reflect fundamental changes affecting Belgian diplomatic practice at the time? Building on the growing interest of historians to analyse the material culture of diplomacy, this part also examines whether the new chancery was used as a venue for cultural diplomacy⁷. More specifically, did the Ministry of Foreign Affairs consciously opt to include Belgian made furniture and artwork in the chancery's interiors to showcase national craftsmanship abroad? The findings discussed in each perspective are compared with additional Belgian diplomatic building projects and those of other sending states throughout this text.

The purpose of this case study driven approach is threefold. First, it aims to shed light on the building policy and practice of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the 1950s. Whereas recent publications have enriched our understanding of the Ministry's inner workings, its approach towards commissioning purpose-built embassies has not yet been adequately covered⁸. In contrast to extensive studies on the building policy of the United States, Great Britain, France and Sweden, scholarly literature on Belgian embassy buildings is still in its infancy⁹. The main body of literature consists of publications made by or in cooperation with the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs¹⁰. This resulted in a number of highly promotional publications with exemplary titles such as *Bel-*

gium's most beautiful embassies from around the world. Such promotional literature mainly emphasises purchased ambassadorial residences of the Belgian state instead of chancery buildings¹¹.

This brings us to the second purpose of this article: broadening the scope of research on Belgian embassies to include a discussion on chanceries. One of the explanations for the lack of exposure of embassy offices may be found in the dichotomy between the residence and the chancery. With the ambassadorial residence traditionally serving as the representational flagship of an embassy – hosting a variety of social gatherings such as dinner parties, receptions and cultural events – it comes as no surprise that the residence's representative character appeals more to the imagination than the chancery's bureaucratic nature. Architectural historians have, however, illustrated that purpose-built chanceries have in some cases been envisioned as representative building assignments. In the case of world powers we are already familiar with this phenomenon. As architectural historian Jane Loeffler indicates, the US State Department opted to construct highly-expressive chanceries as a way of cementing the transatlantic alliance in the immediate post-war era. In the 1950s and 1960s the State Department hired renowned modernist architects such as Marcel Breuer (1902-1981), Eero Saarinen (1910-1961) and Walter Gropius (1883-1969) to design American chanceries in respectively The Hague (1959), London (1960) and Athens (1961). By erecting

7. HOUSSINE ALLOUL AND MICHAEL AUIWERS, "What is (New in) New Diplomatic History", In *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, 48/4, 2018, p. 117; FREDIE FLORÉ AND CAMMIE McATEE (eds.), *The Politics of Furniture: Identity, Diplomacy and Persuasion in Post-war Interiors*, London, 2017.

8. RIK COOLSAET, VINCENT DUJARDIN AND CLAUDE ROOSENS, *Buitenlandse Zaken in België: Geschiedenis van een ministerie, zijn diplomaten en consuls van 1830 tot vandaag*, Tielt, 2014; VINCENT DELCORPS, *Dans les coulisses de la diplomatie: Histoire du ministère belge des Affaires Étrangères (1944-1989)*, Louvain-la-Neuve, 2015.

9. RON ROBIN, *Enclaves of America: The Rhetoric of American Political Architecture Abroad 1900-1965*, Princeton, 1992, p. 63-88; LOEFFLER, *The Architecture of Diplomacy...*, 2011; MARK BERTRAM, *Room for Diplomacy*, Reading, 2011; JAMES STOURTON, *British Embassies: Their Diplomatic and Architectural History*, London, 2017; DENISE HAGSTRÖMER, *In Search of a National Vision: Swedish Embassies from the Mid-20th Century to the Present*, PhD Dissertation, Royal College of Art, 2011.

10. OLIVIER STEVENS, *Belgium's most beautiful embassies from around the world*, Tournai, 2003; S.A., *The old embassy. A photographic tribute to the Belgian embassy in Tokyo, Japan*, Tokyo, 2007; MAREK KWATKOWSKI, *The Mniszech Palace in Warsaw. Embassy of the Kingdom of Belgium*, Warsaw, 2009; CRISTINA WOINAROSKI, *Câmpeanu Villa. Residence of the Belgian Ambassador in Bucharest*, Brussels, 2013.

11. STEVENS, *Belgium's most beautiful embassies from around the world*, p. 179-187; Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Belgian Embassy Washington*, Brussels, 2010.

modernist chanceries overseas, the United States both aimed to emphasise its political patronage over Western Europe and showcase itself as the progressive superpower *par excellence* in the context of the cultural Cold War¹². As such, the State Department wielded architecture as a representational instrument to express ideological and national visions, turning bureaucratic work environments into political symbols on foreign soil.

Building on Loeffler's analysis of erecting chanceries against the backdrop of the transatlantic alliance, the third and final purpose consists of shifting the perspective from a major power to a smaller state actor in this timeframe. The case of the Belgian chancery in Washington, D.C. can help us to detect if and how a small state actor such as Belgium consciously wielded architecture, furniture and art as instruments to express and influence the transatlantic alliance with the United States in the 1950s.

The search for the necessary source material to reconstruct Belgium's embassy building policy in the 1950s is far less straightforward as one might expect at first glance. Somewhat reflecting its status as a state within a state, the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been responsible for the purchase, lease, construction and maintenance of its diplomatic patrimony, thus bypassing the former Ministry of Public Works and the Belgian Buildings Agency (*Regie der Gebouwen*)¹³. In this context, the Ministry set up a small real estate department tasked with overseeing such activities. Unfortunately, the real estate department has been and still is exempted from depositing its records with the Diplomatic Archive run by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This exemption and the apparent lack of interest at the real estate department to systematically preserve records on building projects have had dire consequences as documents

significant for this research were periodically destroyed and thrown out. Going through the boxes stored at the Ministry's real estate department in Brussels, we did not come across any historical records related to the construction of the Washington chancery. Confronted with this lack of primary sources within the walls of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this research instead compiles and addresses a wide variety of source material to overcome this hurdle. This article primarily calls upon private archives and memoirs of key actors involved in the construction of the Washington chancery such as the architects, the building contractor, the ambassador, ministry officials and several foreign ministers. In addition, archival records from the Diplomatic Archive and the Belgian embassy in Washington, D.C., minutes of the Ministerial Council, parliamentary debates and press coverage are also used to further unravel the Washington chancery project and thus get a better understanding of the guidelines shaping the Ministry's building policy and practice in the 1950s.

II. Building up Political Support: Ambassador Robert Silvercrus as Project Developer

At first glance, the decision of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to build a new chancery in the 1950s does not seem to be a noteworthy event. After all, several western sending states had by this time built up plenty of experience in commissioning diplomatic buildings abroad¹⁴. In the case of Belgium, however, the launch of a diplomatic building project was a highly unusual move. By 1950, the number of diplomatic building projects launched by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs could be counted by the fingers of one hand¹⁵. This limited building activity was primarily triggered by highly unusual events transpiring in

12. LOEFFLER, *The Architecture of Diplomacy...*, p. 59-78.

13. Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Annuaire Diplomatique et Consulaire*, Brussels, 1921, p. 241.

14. RON ROBIN, *Enclaves of America...*, p. 63-88; JAMES STOURTON, *British Embassies...*, p. 42-53; FABIEN BELLAT, *Ambassades françaises du XX^e siècle*, Paris, 2020, p. 25-26.

15. This limited diplomatic building activity comprised of a legion building in Beijing (1907), Ankara (1929) and Cairo (1930) and embassy offices in Tokyo (1928).

the receiving state. In 1900, for instance, the Belgian legation building in Beijing was completely destroyed by the Boxers during the siege of the Legation Quarter. Following the end of the hostilities in 1901, the Belgian state received financial compensation from the Chinese government and used the money to build a stately Neo-Renaissance castle in Beijing¹⁶. In 1925 the French government offered Belgium a building plot in Dakar and asked a plot of land in Leopoldville in return. This diplomatic trade-off incentivised the Ministry to construct a consulate building on its recently acquired premises in French West Africa¹⁷. It was not until the late 1950s that a building frenzy took hold of the Ministry. Following the completion of the Washington chancery in 1957, several building projects were launched in quick succession by Brussels including the construction of embassies in Canberra (1958), Brasilia (1960), Tokyo (1960) and Warsaw (1962).

Before this extensive building program was launched in the late 1950s, the Ministry's real estate policy largely consisted of purchasing or leasing premises abroad. By 1948, the Ministry's real estate department – *A/Matériel* – was managing a vast state-owned property portfolio of approximately forty buildings. Although Belgium's diplomatic representation consisted of far more lower-ranked legations than embassies in the late 1940s, the majority of state-owned properties abroad accommodated ambassadorial residences and embassy offices. Reflecting the esteemed status of an embassy as highest diplomatic mission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs mainly housed its embassies in purchased properties whereas lower-ranked legations were predominantly housed in leased buildings. The case of the Belgian embassy in Washington, D.C. clearly reflects this real estate policy. In the

wake of the First World War the US State Department elevated the American legation in Brussels to the rank of embassy in 1919 as a token of recognition for the Belgian war effort¹⁸. On the basis of reciprocity – a key principal in modern diplomacy – the Belgian legation in Washington, D.C. was also upgraded to an embassy in 1920. To accentuate the new status of its diplomatic mission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs opted to house its embassy – both the residence and the chancery – in a state-owned property instead of a leased one. In this context the Ministry paid 200.000 US dollars for a three-storey building located on the corner of Massachusetts Avenue and 18th Street. Originally, this building was designed by the French architect Jules Gabriel Henri de Sibour (1872-1938) to serve as the family house of the well-to-do Ingalls family. Trained at the *École des Beaux Arts* of Paris, de Sibour's architectural brainchild featured his French-American style with local *Beaux Arts* practices¹⁹. In addition to its stately architectural appearance, the embassy was located at Massachusetts Avenue in Washington's diplomatic heart nicknamed Embassy Row. Running from Scott Circle to the US Naval Observatory, this street segment originally accommodated Washington's rich and famous who commissioned grand private residences in the first two decades of the past century²⁰. Strategically situated just north of the US State Department, the White House and Capitol Hill, sending states have gradually accommodated their diplomatic missions in these urban mansions along Massachusetts Avenue since the early 1920s onwards.

During the closing stages of the Second World War, however, the Belgian Ambassador Robert van der Straten-Ponthoz (1879-1962) and his diplomatic staff were ousted from the former Ingalls House as a result of Belgium's precarious socioec-

16. FRANS BAEKELANDT, "Het Kasteel van Marchienne in China", In *Bulletin van de vereniging van de Adel van het Koninkrijk België*, oktober 2007, p. 45-55.

17. Note pour monsieur le ministre (DAB, 14.074 bis. *Notes sur les immeubles de service à l'étranger et à Bruxelles*, 12 April 1948, p. 2).

18. COOLSLET, DUJARDIN AND ROOSENS, *Buitenlandse Zaken in België...*, p. 148.

19. The L'Enfant Trust, *Dupont Circle Revisited. A Walker's Tour*, Washington, D.C., 1984, p. 18.

20. FREDERICK GUTHEIM AND ANTOINETTE J. LEE, *Worthy of the Nation. Washington, D.C., from L'Enfant to the National Capital Planning Commission*, Baltimore, 2006, p. 162.



The façade of the former Belgian embassy on 1780 Massachusetts Avenue (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Online Catalogue : <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/dc0474/>, undated).

onomic situation. Following the liberation of Belgium in September 1944, the Liberal Minister of Provision Paul Kronacker (1897-1994) was tasked with setting up an economic mission in Washington, D.C. to buy and ship food, coal and clothing to war-ravaged Belgium²¹. As Minister Kronacker faced difficulties to find office space for his headquarters in Washington, D.C. upon his arrival in December 1944, he wielded his authority to requisition the Belgian embassy at 1780 Massachusetts Avenue. As a compensation for Kronacker's sudden takeover, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs received the necessary funds to purchase a new chancery building in the American capital. In this context the Ministry acquired a freestanding Federal style townhouse at 1715 22nd Street – a side street of Massachusetts Avenue's Embassy Row – for 25.000 US dollars in January 1945²². Based on the classical principles of Greek and Roman architecture, Federal style architecture formed the American adaptation of Georgian architecture. Originally, wealthy British settlers had introduced Georgian architecture to the thirteen colonies by commissioning stately country and town houses. Following the American Declaration of Independence of 1776, however, it was deemed unpatriotic to keep the name of Georgian architecture which referred to the detested British monarch King George III (1738-1820). Instead, the revolutionaries opted to change its name into Federal style and wielded this architectural style as an instrument to cement the newly-independent federal state of America. Labelled as the country's first national architecture, this style was immensely popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and witnessed several revivals²³. This was especially the case in Washington, D.C. where it was extensively promoted by American President

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) who also made a name for himself as an architect. A typical Federal-style townhouse such as the Belgian chancery comprised a low-rise rectangular structure with a pitched roof. The façade usually featured an arrangement of bricks with each row laid in alternating headers and stretchers – the so-called Flemish bond – and mediocre window frames. Although exterior decorations were reduced to a bare minimum, the more luxurious townhouses harboured an elegant entryway comprising classical elements such as columns and pediments. In contrast to Georgian architecture, the columns and mouldings were narrower and less decorative.

Amidst the relocation of the embassy offices to 22nd Street, Ambassador van der Straten-Ponthoz was succeeded by Baron Robert Silvercruys (1893-1975) on 8 March 1945. Steadily climbing up the diplomatic ladder from attaché in 1919 to ambassador in Ottawa by 1944, Baron Silvercruys was a seasoned diplomat by the time he became Belgian ambassador to the United States²⁴. As Thomas Vanwing indicates in his master's thesis on the baron's diplomatic career, Silvercruys was an admirer of the United States and firm proponent of strengthening the transatlantic alliance. As it became apparent that Great Britain was no longer capable to play a leading role on the European continent, Foreign Minister Spaak increasingly saw the United States as a key partner to facilitate the political and economic integration of Western Europe from 1947 onwards²⁵. In this context Silvercruys served as the Belgian representative during key negotiations on joining the Marshall Plan and NATO²⁶. During his ambassadorship, the baron built up an extensive social network reaching to the highest echelons of American politics. His marriage with Rosemary

21. REINOUT VANDER HULST, "De opdracht van Paul Kronacker (1944-1947). De invloed van de handelsmissies op het 'Belgische mirakel'", In *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis*, nr. 95, 2017 (2), p. 401-440.

22. Note pour monsieur le secrétaire général (DAB, 14.074 bis. *Notes sur les immeubles de service à l'étranger et à Bruxelles, Washington*, 2 August 1949, p. 1).

23. LOIS CRAIG, *The Federal Presence: Architecture, Politics, and Symbols in United States Government Building*, Cambridge (Massachusetts), 1978, p. 50-51.

24. THOMAS VANWING, *Ambassadeur Silvercruys en de Belgisch-Amerikaanse relaties (1945-1959): Een diplomatieke rots in de Atlantische Oceaan*, master's dissertation, KU Leuven, 2012, p. 20-52.

25. RIK COOLSÆT, *België en zijn buitenlandse politiek, 1830-2015*, Leuven, 2014, p. 377-402.

26. VANWING, *Ambassadeur Silvercruys ...*, p. 50-70.



Façade of the former Belgian chancery at 1715 22nd Street, 2020 (Image provided by the Embassy of the Dominican Republic in Washington, D.C.).

Turner (1917-1986) – widow of the Democratic Senator Brien McMahon (1903-1952) – in 1953 only extended his social capital. In addition to investing in personal contacts, Silvercruys also ran a tight ship as ambassador as he showed a considerable interest in the material settings of his embassy. Reflecting this characteristic, he immediately took action to improve the working conditions at the chancery at 22nd Street at the start of his ambassadorship. Besides the lack of a telephone system and separate rooms for filing and encrypting messages, the cramped working conditions in the chancery were a thorn in the eye of the baron. Notwithstanding carrying out alteration works during the summer of 1945, Ambassador Silvercruys still remained dissatisfied with his diplomatic work environment as he indicated in a letter to the former Catholic Prime Minister Georges Theunis (1873-1966):

“Les quelques travaux d’aménagement de la Chancellerie de la 22^{ème} rue sont aujourd’hui à peu près terminés. Nous étions vraiment très à l’étroit, avec de mauvaises conditions de travail, et nos bureaux faisaient somme toute piètre figure. Nous avons récupéré sept bureaux à charge des locaux qui étaient occupés jadis par le gardien de l’immeuble! [...] Tous cela n’est pas parfait mais cela permettra à la machine de tourner”²⁷.

As Washington, D.C. became ever more important to Belgian foreign policymakers, the number of diplomatic staff members increased significantly, which put a further strain on the already cramped office space. Whereas the diplomatic staff consisted of just seven officials in 1939, the embassy staff had significantly increased to eighteen by 1957²⁸. Fortunately, Kronacker’s commercial mission to the United States drew to a close in March 1947 and the former embassy building at 1780 Massachusetts Avenue was converted into

additional office space²⁹. An additional building situated at Massachusetts Avenue was also purchased by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to accommodate the offices of the diplomatic staff. Confronted with a growing embassy staff scattered across three office buildings in the American capital, Ambassador Robert Silvercruys believed it was far more efficient to supervise his staff from a centralised work environment. Instead of purchasing or leasing a spacious property to serve as new chancery, the ambassador opted for the rather uncommon approach – especially in the case of Belgium – to construct a new chancery in the American capital. In a letter to Minister Spaak on 5 April 1947, the senior diplomat introduced the idea to construct a chancery composed of thirty offices to improve the working conditions and overall efficiency of his bureaucratic apparatus³⁰.

At the time Silvercruys unveiled his plans to Spaak, purpose-built chanceries were a rare sight to come across in Washington’s streetscape. Just as Belgium, sending states had primarily opted to house their embassy offices in purchased or leased buildings along or in the vicinity of Massachusetts Avenue’s Embassy Row. A rare exception was the British purpose-built chancery at 3100 Massachusetts Avenue completed in 1930. The construction of chanceries remained a marginal phenomenon until the 1960s. By this time, it had become increasingly difficult for sending states to purchase prime real estate in the vicinity of Massachusetts Avenue. This incentivised the US State Department to lease a large plot of federal land – referred to as the International Chancery Center – to foreign governments to construct spacious chanceries³¹. Such initiatives were, however, non-existent at the time Silvercruys came up with the idea to construct a chancery building in the American capital. Minister Spaak was receptive towards this proposal and tasked the baron with finding a suitable building plot.

27. Letter of Robert Silvercruys to Georges Theunis (DAB, 18.434/3 *Papiers R. Silvercruys*, 18 June 1945).

28. Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Annuaire Diplomatique et Consulaire*, Brussels, 1939; *Ibidem*, 1957.

29. *Ibidem*, 1957.

30. Letter of Robert Silvercruys to Paul-Henri Spaak (Archive of the Belgian Embassy in Washington, D.C., 5 April 1947, p. 2).

31. FREDERICK GUTHEIM AND ANTOINETTE J. LEE, *Worthy of the Nation...*, p. 322.

Calling upon the local knowhow of its diplomatic agents to scan the real estate market was common practice at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the time. Back in December 1937, for instance, Spaak decided to relocate the Belgian legation in The Hague to a more stately estate. Therefore, the serving head of mission Baron Herry was instructed to find a new residence in the Dutch capital. During his house hunting trips, however, Baron Herry was accompanied by an official of the Belgian Ministry of Finance who served as a watchdog to ensure the budget stayed within reasonable bounds³². With Ambassador Silvercruys posted on the other side of the Atlantic, it seems the long distance played to his advantage as he was given a free hand in his search.

Welcoming this mandate, Silvercruys did not waste any time as he personally visited a dozen building plots up for sale in March 1947. Already on 5 April 1947 the Belgian head of mission sent a detailed report to Brussels in which he urged Spaak to purchase a 4500 square meters building plot – at the corner of 34th Street NW and Garfield Street – situated just northwest of Massachusetts Avenue’s Embassy Row. Whereas the three current buildings accommodating the embassy offices were strategically located at or near Embassy Row, the senior diplomat proposed to move the chancery from the capital’s diplomatic heart to the north western suburbs. Reminiscent of present-day real estate agents, the ambassador accentuated the three criteria – location, location, location – which triggered him to select this specific plot in his report to Spaak. Immersed in a residential and wooded neighbourhood near Rock Creek Park, the plot is situated opposite to Washington National Cathedral. This Neo-Gothic cathedral, the fourth-tallest structure in Washington, D.C., was constructed on the most elevated site of the

city which further emphasises its status as national landmark. Based on his main selection criteria, there is reason to believe that Silvercruys opted for this prominent location to increase Belgium’s prestige in the contemporary *Caput Mundi*. Only after accentuating its scenic qualities, Silvercruys also emphasised the site was conveniently located near two bus stops and other diplomatic missions such as the British purpose-built embassy.

As discussed above, however, the vicinity of other diplomatic missions did not seem to be that important to Silvercruys as he actually made the case to move away from Embassy Row. Well aware that the Ministry of Finance would have the final say in acquisitioning the plot of land, the ambassador also emphasised the building plot’s reasonable price of 21.000 US dollars. Following his vigorous sales pitch, Silvercruys argued to Spaak that his proposal was an opportunity not to be squandered: “Il ne me paraît pas possible de trouver, à l’avenir, un terrain aussi bien situé dans des conditions aussi avantageuses”³³. The ambassador’s efforts were not in vain. On 12 May 1947 the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs purchased the site, an expense which was greenlighted by the Chamber of Representatives the following year³⁴.

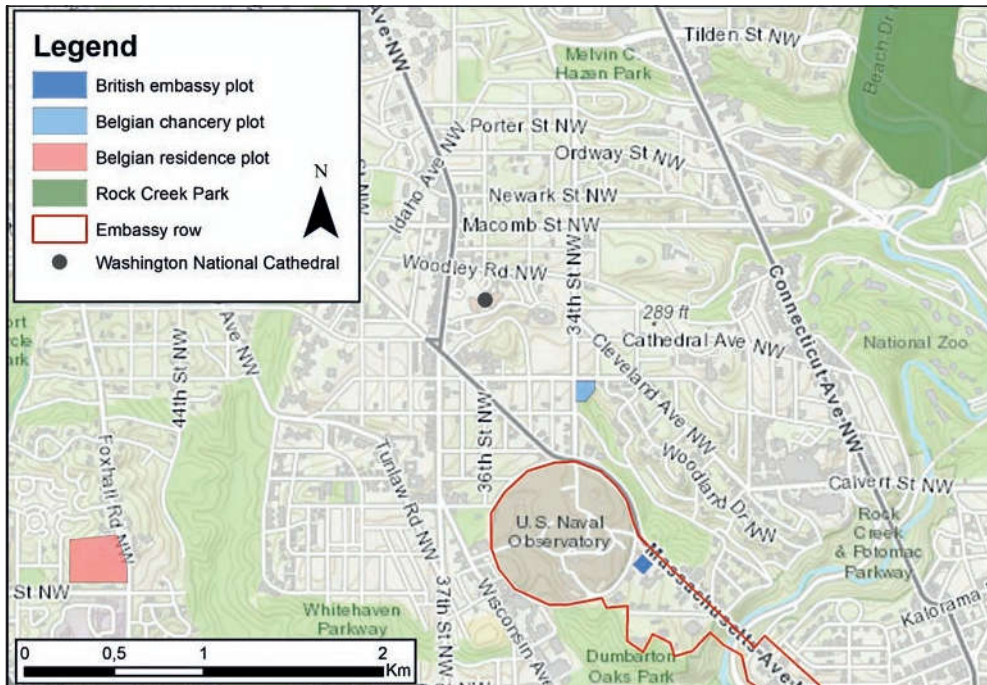
This acquisition of land stands in stark contrast to subsequent building projects of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the post-war period. Whereas the Washington purchase was a unilateral Belgian initiative, the governments of Australia, Brazil, India and Poland instead allocated building plots to sending states such as Belgium as part of beneficial long-term leases. As such, these state actors strategically promoted the construction of purpose-built embassies to satisfy the accommodation needs of sending states and reinforce the political status of their respective capital³⁵.

32. Conseil des Ministres du 3 décembre 1937 (State Archives of Belgium, *Minutes of the Council of Ministers, Légation à La Haye*, 3 December 1937, p. 361).

33. Letter of Robert Silvercruys to Paul-Henri Spaak (Archive of the Belgian Embassy in Washington, D.C., 5 April 1947, p. 2).

34. Plenary session of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives of 17 June 1948 (Plenum.be, proceedings of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, 17 June 1948, p. 96).

35. GRAEME BARROW, *Canberra’s Embassies*, Canberra, 1978, p. 4; GLADYS ABANKWA-MEIER-KLODT, *Delhi’s Diplomatic Domains*, New Delhi, 2013, p. 17-19; JAMES STOURTON, *British Embassies...*, p. 308.



Map indicating the Belgian building plot and its surroundings, made by Christophe De Coster, HOST Research Group, Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

Notwithstanding the purchase of this building plot, the highest echelons of the Ministry were far from keen to actually build a new chancery. Especially Secretary-General Hervé de Gruben (1894-1967) – the Ministry's highest official who reported directly to Spaak – strongly opposed the building plans arguing these would be far too expensive. This was not the first time Hervé de Gruben thwarted the construction of a diplomatic building for budgetary reasons. Back in July 1935, the Catholic Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Paul van Zeeland (1893-1973) sent De Gruben – posted as counsellor at the Belgian legation in Berlin at the time – on a special mission to Moscow. As part of Van Zeeland's scheme to established diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union, De Gruben was tasked with drafting up a report on the most suitable manner to accommodate the new Belgian legation in Moscow³⁶. In his report, the Belgian diplomat clearly ruled out the prospect of building a legation indicating that the construction costs in a "rogue state" as the Soviet Union would bear an exorbitant price tag³⁷. Instead, he argued it would be far more economical to lease a property in the Soviet capital. As Hervé de Gruben became the Ministry's secretary-general in 1947, his attitude towards commissioning diplomatic buildings had not changed as he labelled the proposal of commissioning a chancery in the American capital to be "[...] insoutenable, puisqu'elle entraîne une accroissement de dépenses"³⁸. Meanwhile, on 20 March 1947, Spaak also began to cumulate the function of Belgian foreign minister with that of prime minister. Insiders within the Ministry informed Baron Silvercruys that Spaak was biting off more than he could chew which resulted in his negligence of the day-to-day operation at the Min-

istry of Foreign Affairs³⁹. This may help explain the sudden loss of interest from Spaak in commissioning a new chancery despite his initial enthusiasm by greenlighting the purchase of a building plot.

Confronted with both opposition and a lack of interest within the Ministry's walls, Silvercruys instead reached out to the highest political echelons in Brussels to support his building plans. Reflecting his skills as a seasoned diplomat who had built up an impressive social network by the late 1940s, the ambassador was backed by the governor of the National Bank Maurice Frère (1890-1970), the former Minister of Finance Camille Gutt (1884-1971) and the serving Minister of Finance Gaston Eyskens (1905-1988). In a letter to the ambassador on 23 March 1949, Eyskens once again expressed his support to the baron:

"Sachant que ce projet de construction vous tient tant à cœur, j'ai fait de mon mieux pour tâcher de persuader M. Spaak des avantages que présente la réalisation de ce projet. Je n'ai malheureusement pu obtenir son adhésion, il estime devoir attendre encore"⁴⁰.

Despite his support, Spaak's apparent lack of interest and De Gruben's strong opposition meant the site at Garfield Street remained an undeveloped plot of land. The national elections of 26 June 1949, however, shifted the balance of power as the victorious Christian Social Party swapped its Socialist coalition partner for the Liberals. As such, Spaak's twin job as prime minister and foreign minister had run its course. As Eyskens became prime minister and Paul van Zeeland made his political comeback as foreign minister, two key positions

36. FRANK SEBERECHTS, "De Haven van Antwerpen en de Diplomatieke en Commerciële Erkenning van de Sovjet-Unie, 1918-1935", in *Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis*, nr. 15, 2005, p. 85-102; COOLSAET, *België en zijn buitenlandse politiek...*, p. 287-288.

37. Letter of Hervé de Gruben to Paul van Zeeland (CEGESOMA, *archief Hervé de Gruben AA699*, rapport d'une mission officieuse à Moscou relative à l'installation matérielle de la Légation de Belgique à Moscou (15), 30 July 1935, p. 6).

38. Note pour monsieur le ministre (DAB, 14.074 bis. *Notes sur les immeubles de service à l'étranger et à Bruxelles, Washington*, 14 January 1948, p. 5); VINCENT DELCORPS, "Le secrétaire général du ministère belge des Affaires étrangères : Fonction, profil et nomination (1944-2002)", in MICHEL DUMOULIN AND CATHERINE LANNEAU (eds.), *La biographie individuelle et collective dans le champ des relations internationales*, Brussels, 2016, p. 195-212.

39. Letter of Walter Loridan to Robert Silvercruys (DAB, 18.434/4 *Papiers R. Silvercruys*, 11 June 1947).

40. Letter of Gaston Eyskens to Robert Silvercruys (DAB, file 18.434/5 *Papiers R. Silvercruys*, 23 March 1949).

were occupied by politicians who supported the ambassador's proposal to construct a chancery. Secretary-General Hervé de Gruben on the other hand stuck to his guns as became apparent during a budgetary meeting with Eyskens and Van Zeeland on 17 November 1949. During this meeting, Prime Minister Eyskens brought up the subject of building a new chancery in Washington, D.C. as he asked Van Zeeland and De Gruben to share their thoughts on the feasibility of the building project. De Gruben once again fiercely opposed the idea as he indicated that the entire project was "[...] une dépense somptuaire, inutile et superfétatoire"⁴¹. Somewhat surprised by the criticism of his secretary-general during the meeting, Van Zeeland tried to defuse the situation as he indicated that he had not yet made up his mind:

*"Doucement, doucement...je suis en train d'étudier le dossier. Monsieur de Gruben vient de vous donner son avis qui ne sera pas nécessairement le mien. Son avis comptera évidemment pour beaucoup"*⁴².

While Hervé de Gruben remained adamant, the Christian Social Party further cemented its position as the leading political force in Belgium. Against the backdrop of the Royal Question, the 1950 elections significantly transformed the political landscape as the Christian Social Party won an absolute majority in Belgian parliament which was crystalized in a single-party government comprised of Christian-democrats. Three years later, in March 1953, Hervé de Gruben was succeeded as secretary-general by Louis Scheyven (1904-1979) who previously served as director-general of Political Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Scheyven was closely affiliated to the Christian Social Party as his brother Raymond Scheyven served as parliamentarian and treasurer for the party. During his term in office, Scheyven kept a

much lower profile than his predecessor as he was mainly preoccupied with a bureaucratic reorganisation⁴³. With Hervé de Gruben out of the picture and the Christian Social Party calling all the shots in Brussels, Paul van Zeeland put forward the proposal to build a new chancery during the Ministerial Council on 9 April 1954. Going through Van Zeeland's motivations, it is striking to notice how he only brought up practical considerations to persuade his colleague ministers to greenlight this building proposal. Indicating how this purpose-built chancery would be spacious enough to accommodate all Belgian diplomatic agents in Washington, D.C., Foreign Minister Paul van Zeeland argued this centralised work environment would tremendously increase the coordination and efficiency of the country's diplomatic apparatus across the Atlantic⁴⁴. As such, the building project was not so much envisioned by Van Zeeland as an occasion to increase Belgium's visibility in the American capital by means of architecture. It seems this practical rationale bore fruit as his proposal was unanimously greenlighted by his Christian-democratic colleagues.

Just two days following this government decision, however, the national elections of 11 April 1954 once again profoundly reshuffled the balance of power in Belgium. The ruling Christian Social Party lost its majority and was succeeded by an unprecedented coalition government comprised of Socialists and Liberals. This so-called 'purple' government – derived from mixing the red colour of the Socialists and the blue of the Liberals – marked the return of Paul-Henri Spaak as foreign minister. Although there is no clear evidence in writing that Spaak tried to put the building project on hold as he had done in the past, it speaks volumes that the allocation of one million US dollars authorized by his predecessor Paul van Zeeland drew flak following Spaak's return as for-

41. Letter of Roger Ockrent to Robert Silvercruys (DAB, 18.434/5 *Papiers R. Silvercruys*, 18 November 1949); VINCENT DELCORPS, "Le secrétaire général ...", p. 195-212.

42. Letter of Roger Ockrent to Robert Silvercruys (DAB, 18.434/5 *Papiers R. Silvercruys*, 18 November 1949).

43. DELCORPS, "Le secrétaire général ...", p. 202-203.

44. Conseil de Cabinet du vendredi le 9 avril 1954 (Archives Université Catholique de Louvain, *Papiers Paul van Zeeland*, 664-665 *Conseil des Ministres* I, 9 April 1954, p. 1-2).

eign minister. The Court of Audit – the watchdog monitoring the government’s financial dealings – expressed doubts on the financial feasibility of the building project:

*“La Cour des Comptes met obstacle à la réalisation d’un prêt à consentir, par notre entremise, au Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, en vue de la construction de l’immeuble de la chancellerie de l’Ambassade de Belgique à Washington. L’opération ne serait possible que sous la forme d’une vente, avec paiements échelonnés, par un intermédiaire”*⁴⁵.

Although the Court of Audit withdrew its support, the financial watchdog did leave the door open for a professional intermediary to step forward and finance the chancery’s construction. According to the Court of Audit, it was far more feasible for the Belgian state to reimburse such an intermediary by means of instalment payments in order to stretch the total cost of the building project over a manageable period of time. From the point of view of Silvercruys, however, it seemed that his aspirations to move to brand new embassy offices during his ambassadorship had yet again become a distant dream. Finding a private investor to finance his building plans appeared to be an almost impossible task at first glance. To put it bluntly, which of the ambassador’s political friends was financially capable let alone willing to put the enormous figure of one million US dollars on the table? Fortunately for the baron, his close friend and former Minister of Finance Camille Gutt offered financial support as he convinced his fellow board members at the Banque Lambert to grant a loan to the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to finance the chancery’s construction⁴⁶. At the time, the Banque Lambert was one of the leading Belgian banks

which was heavily involved in financing real estate projects⁴⁷. In order to partially refund the Belgian bank, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs sold the three diplomatic buildings accommodating the embassy offices in Washington, D.C.⁴⁸. On 27 January 1957, for instance, the chancery on 22nd Street was sold to the Dominican Republic for 50.000 US dollars with Silvercruys signing the contract of sale⁴⁹.

III. Designing the New Chancery: “A Building Reminiscent of the Country it Represents”

After seven years of political tug-of-war in Brussels and the search for funding, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs could finally proceed with the building project in 1954. In this context the Ministry was in need of an architect to design its new embassy offices in the American capital. At the time, the Ministry did not employ architects or engineers, but instead hired them in the context of a specific building or renovation project. As discussed previously, the Ministry’s real estate department – *A/Matériel* – was mainly preoccupied with overseeing the purchase, lease and maintenance of Belgium’s diplomatic patrimony abroad. As the launch of purpose-built diplomatic projects was highly exceptional, *A/Matériel* was not equipped in terms of trained staff and adequate resources to closely monitor a project of such magnitude as the Washington chancery. In contrast, both the British Foreign Office and the US State Department consisted of well-oiled real estate departments which guided building projects from start to finish in the 1950s⁵⁰. Instead, *A/Matériel* called upon Belgian ambassadors to monitor construction or renovation works abroad as has already become appar-

45. Letter of Camille Gutt to Robert Silvercruys (DAB, 18.434/7 *Papiers R. Silvercruys*, 17 December 1954).

46. Letter of Camille Gutt to Robert Silvercruys (DAB, 18.434/7 *Papiers R. Silvercruys*, 17 December 1954); JEAN F. CROMBOIS, *Camille Gutt and Postwar International Finance*, Londen, 2011, p. 129; ANNE-MYRIAM DUTRIEUE AND JEAN-MARIE MOITROUX, *Een bank in de geschiedenis: Van de Bank van Brussel en de Bank Lambert tot de BBL, 1871-1996*, Brussel, 1995, p. 199.

47. *Ibidem*, 273.

48. No documents concerning the exact figures could be retrieved in the Ministry’s archives.

49. Information provided by the Embassy of the Dominican Republic to the United States in Washington, mail correspondence of 30 April 2020.

50. LOEFFLER, *The Architecture of Diplomacy...*, p. 59-78; BERTRAM, *Room for Diplomacy...*, p. 231-255.

ent with the baron's prominent involvement in the search for a building plot.

This unguided and decentralised approach also manifested itself in the search for an architect. Instead of organising an architectural competition to award such prestigious commissions, *A/Matériel* would generally call upon Belgian ambassadors to find a local architect in the receiving state. Exemplary for this decentralised approach was the transfer of the Belgian embassy from Sydney to Canberra in 1959. As part of this diplomatic relocation, a new ambassadorial residence and chancery were constructed in Canberra. Updating *A/Matériel* on the progress on 21 March 1958, Ambassador Willy Stevens indicated how his predecessor had "[...] pris contact avec un architecte. Celui-ci a élaboré des plans pour une résidence. En d'autres termes, mon prédécesseur a posé les bases du transfert matériel et il ne me reste qu'à réaliser celui-ci"⁵¹. The first indications of an architectural competition organised by the Ministry only appear at the end of the 1970s in the case of commissioning an embassy in New Delhi⁵². The Washington case also reflects this deregulated approach as the personal contacts of Silvercruys played a pivotal role in selecting an architect in 1954. More specifically, the economic mission set up by Minister Kronacker in December 1944 brought the baron into contact with the Belgian architect Hugo Van Kuyck (1902-1975). Following his initial success with shipping essentials to Belgium, Minister Kronacker was also tasked with rebooting the national economy in the wake of the German occupation. In this context of speeding up Belgium's post-war reconstruction, Kronacker appointed his friend Hugo Van Kuyck as technical advisor to his commercial missions in August 1945 to study prefabrication methods used

by America's building industry⁵³. As Kronacker's headquarters was accommodated in the former ambassadorial residence at 1780 Massachusetts Avenue and his staff worked closely together with officials of the Belgian embassy, Hugo Van Kuyck was no stranger to Ambassador Silvercruys⁵⁴.

Studying architecture at the Royal Academy Fine Arts of Antwerp and subsequently civil engineering at the State University of Ghent, Van Kuyck initially worked in the design studio of the renowned Belgian architect Victor Horta (1861-1947). Following a series of much-discussed lectures he had given on urbanism in Scandinavia, Van Kuyck was offered a lectureship at Yale University in 1931. During the Second World War, his ties with the United States only intensified. In the wake of the German invasion of Belgium on 10 May 1940, the engineer architect decided to leave for America. En route to the United States, he met the fleeing Belgian government in Limoges and La Rochelle. Since Van Kuyck possessed an American visa, the government had entrusted the architect to hand over sensitive diplomatic documents to Georges Theunis – friend of Silvercruys – who served as special ambassador in Washington D.C. during the war⁵⁵. During his time in America, he earned a degree in architecture at the University of Richmond in 1941 which enabled him to take on work as architect on American soil. Through his teaching career and studies, Hugo Van Kuyck built up an extensive network among American architects and building contractors on the east coast. Following America's entry into the war in December 1941, Van Kuyck enlisted in the United States Army Corps of Engineers collaborating in the planning of the amphibious landings at Normandy and Iwo Jima⁵⁶. On 6 August 1945 he was demobilized following a request of the

51. Letter of Willy Stevens to Paul-Henri Spaak (DAB, 14.898 Belgique-Australie 1957-1965, 21 March 1958).

52. SATISH GUJRAL, *A Brush with Life*, New Delhi, 1997, p. 221.

53. FREDIE FLORÉ, "Technological progress as an obstruction to domestic comfort: Hugo Van Kuyck and the introduction of the American example in post-war Belgium", in DAVID ELLISON AND ANDREW LEACH (eds.), *On Discomfort. Moments in a modern history of architectural culture*, London, 2017, p. 64-79.

54. VANDER HULST, "De opdracht van Paul Kronacker ...", p. 419.

55. CHARLES SCHELFHOUT, *In het kielzog van Hugo Van Kuyck. Een uitzonderlijke Belg*, Bonheiden, 1988, p. 47.

56. FRANCINE DE NAVE AND RITA JALON, *Hugo Van Kuyck, de architect van de landing*, Antwerpen, 1994; SCHELFHOUT, *In het kielzog van Hugo Van Kuyck...*, p. 72-84.

Belgian government so he could take part in the Kronacker missions. Whilst working and living in the United States, Hugo Van Kuyck increasingly denounced his Beaux-arts training as he argued that a rationalized industrial basis should become the bedrock of post-war architecture in Belgium as he indicated in a 1946 publication :

“Maybe the time is approaching when our men, proud of the traditions of their Flemish and Walloon forefathers, like the great builders of cathedrals and palaces, will plan on a scale which is beyond the vision of the good bourgeois of today. Maybe our towns of tomorrow integrated with parks and roads, built with the tremendous technical means now at our disposal, will take an outstanding place in the history of architecture”⁵⁷.

Putting his money where his mouth was, Van Kuyck increasingly opted for industrial construction methods in his designs. Just north of his hometown of Antwerp, in the Luchtbal neighbourhood, he designed a vast high-rise social housing project (1954-1962) comprising a series of housing blocks and towers constructed by means of modulate, prefabricated and monolithically cast concrete⁵⁸. Inspired by the modernist building principles of the *Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne*, the project included communal facilities and was immersed by green open space⁵⁹. Van Kuyck also made a name for himself by designing major commercial office towers in Belgium. The insurance company *Prévoyance Sociale* hired the Belgian architect to design a skyscraper – a novelty in the skyline of Brussels – to accommodate its new head office. Completed in 1957, Van Kuyck’s skyscraper formed a locally embedded approach to American corporate modernism characterised by repetitive modular forms and the prominent dis-

play of modern building materials such as steel, concrete and a glazed façade that was intended to express corporate transparency⁶⁰. It would be a step to far, however, to label Hugo Van Kuyck as a dogmatic architect who swore by the principles of modernist architecture. The Antwerp-based headquarters of the International Bell Telephone Company illustrates Van Kuyck’s versatile take on the principles of modernist architecture. Completed in 1958, the office complex comprised of a fourteen storey tower flanked by two medium-rise wings built of reinforced concrete. Instead of a glazed façade, Van Kuyck opted for bluestone exteriors giving the building a more stately appearance.

By the time Ambassador Silvercruys reached out to him to design the new chancery in 1954, Van Kuyck was one of the leading architects Belgium had to offer⁶¹. In retrospect, it is understandable why the ambassador chose Van Kuyck to design the new chancery. As *A/Matériel* did not have the trained staff and resources to closely guide building projects, the Ministry generally awarded its commissions on turnkey basis which made the architect responsible for both the design and execution of the project. Calling upon a Belgian architect who was licensed to work in the United States and had built up a strong network of architects and building contractors across the Atlantic, Van Kuyck was the ideal architect to fill up the void left by *A/Matériel* and get the job done. As such, the decision to hire a Belgian architect was most likely motivated by practical reasons and not so much envisaged as a means of cultural diplomacy to showcase Belgian craftsmanship in the American capital. Whereas the State Department hired American and foreign architects who moved to the US as an instrument of cultural diplomacy, its Belgian counterpart developed a tendency to call upon the services of an architect residing in the

57. HUGO VAN KUYCK, *Modern Belgian Architecture. A Short Survey of Architectural Developments in Belgium in the Last Half Century*, New York, 1946, unnumbered pages.

58. ELS DE VOS AND SELIN GEERINCKX, “Modernist high-rises in post-war Antwerp: Two answers to the same question”, In *Cidades, Comunidades e Territórios*, 33, 2016, p. 13.

59. JOS DE BREMAEKER, SERGE DE PALUW AND FILIP JANSSENS, *75 jaar Luchtbal, 1925-2000*, Antwerpen, 2000, p. 65.

60. JURIAAN VAN MEEL, *The European Office : Office Design and National Context*, Rotterdam, 2000, p. 17.

61. DE VOS AND GEERINCKX, “Modernist high-rises in post-war Antwerp...”, p. 11.

receiving state for practical reasons as was the case in Canberra, Brasilia and Warsaw during the late 1950s and early 1960s. In the case of Van Kuyck, one can also consider him to be a local architect as he worked as an associate partner at the New York-based architectural firm Voorhees, Walker, Smith and Smith. Under the leadership of Ralph Walker (1889-1973), this firm had made a name for itself designing a series of skyscrapers with Art Deco detailing in Manhattan including the Western Union (1930) and the Irving Trust Building (1932)⁶². The Belgian chancery project was not the first commission with a highly representational undertone that Walker took on. In the context of the World's Fairs of Chicago (1933-1934) and New York (1939-1940), he was appointed to the Architect's Board and designed a series of exhibition buildings⁶³. Reflecting his prominent position in the American architectural scene, he served as president of the American Institute of Architects from 1949 until 1951. In his spare time, Walker showed a keen interest in poetry which illustrates his attitude towards modernist architecture. He used a telling metaphor to criticize the hallmarks of orthodox modernism in architecture: "Like a fly in amber, man, poor fool, is imprisoned within his own dogma of steel and glass"⁶⁴.

In the context of designing the Washington chancery, both Van Kuyck and Walker opted for a more classical approach as they submitted their design to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in late 1954, just a couple of months following the decision of the Christian-democratic government to commission a new chancery. In the presentation booklet, the architects indicated to the Ministry that their design would provide the Belgian embassy staffers with a spacious work environment of almost 3500 m² thus meeting the ambassador's accommodational needs. It almost seems that the architects

took their cues from Silvercruids as the main features of their design corresponds with the ambassador's aspirations discussed in the previous part of this article. Unfortunately, no correspondence has been retrieved between the architects and Silvercruids let alone *A/Matériel* to back such a claim. Intended to comply with local building codes and blend in with its residential surroundings, Van Kuyck and Walker opted for a low-rise concrete structure standing in stark contrast to their high-rise projects. As the building plot was located on the corner of an intersection and the land dropped off into a ravine at the back, the architects moulded this structure into a crescent form which gave the building an inviting appearance from the streetscape. In front of the chancery's main entrance – located in the crescent's centre – a roundabout was paved to facilitate dropping off visitors applying for a visa or meeting an embassy official.

The architects also clearly emphasised that their architectural brainchild would intertwine the building's bureaucratic purpose with the representational role traditionally given to embassy architecture by indicating that the building would be "[...] reminiscent of the country it represents"⁶⁵. Such claims regularly pop up as architects present their embassy design to foreign ministries, turning such statements in platitudes. It is striking to notice, however, how in the case of the Belgian chancery in Washington, D.C. the architects actually contradicted this representational ambition to resonate Belgian identity by means of the chancery's architecture as they indicated the building's external appearance was based on "[...] the classical aspects of Washington"⁶⁶. From the city's grid plan conceived by the French-American engineer Pierre L'Enfant (1754-1825) to the architecture of several monumental buildings, the American capital's neoclassical appearance had

62. GWENDOLYN WRIGHT, *USA. Modern Architectures in History*, London, 2008, p. 85.

63. RANDALL VOSBECK, TONY WRENN AND ANDREW SMITH, *A Legacy of Leadership: The Presidents of the American Institute of Architects*, Washington, D.C., 2008, p. 86.

64. *Ibidem*.

65. Presentation booklet 'the Belgian Chancellery' (Felix Archives Antwerp (FAA), *architect Hugo Van Kuyck, bouwkundig archief, Belgische ambassade, Washington, USA, 28#9562*, unnumbered pages).

66. *Ibidem*.



Sketch of the chancery's exteriors (Felix Archives Antwerp, Architect Hugo Van Kuyck, 28#9562, Presentation booklet, unnumbered pages. Despite substantial enquiries, JBH has not been able to find the copyright holders of this work. They are kindly requested to contact the editors).



Exteriors of the Belgian chancery in Canberra (Archives of the Belgian Embassy to Australia, July 1962).

been modelled after the Greco-Roman architecture, seeing these 'democracies' of antiquity as a source of inspiration for the young American state in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century⁶⁷. Over time, neoclassical architecture witnessed several revivals in the context of commissioning government buildings in the United States. During the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt (1933-1945), stripped classicism was favoured by the federal government in commissioning public buildings in the American capital. This stripped classicist style entailed a modern derivation of Greco-Roman architecture which left out most or all ornamentation and shaped several government built projects in Washington, D.C. such as the Folger Shakespeare Library (1933), the Federal Reserve Building (1937) and the US State Department headquarters (1941). In the immediate post-war period, this modern take on classical architecture was also used in Belgian government architecture with prime examples such as the National Bank of Belgium (1948-1958) and the Royal Library of Belgium (1954-1969) in Brussels⁶⁸. The stripped classicist design for the Washington chancery was intertwined with modern building elements as the main entrance combined classical vocabulary such as pillars and white marble walls with a fully glazed revolving door⁶⁹. Reminiscent of several architectural icons in Washington, D.C. such as the Lincoln Memorial (1922), Washington National Cathedral (1906-1988) and the Pentagon (1943), the chancery's façade was covered with the highly popular Indiana limestone which was arranged in a square pattern accentuating the strong horizontality of the design. The British architect Edwin Lutyens (1869-1944) also used Indiana limestone for the exteriors of his Neo-Georgian design for the British embassy in Washington, D.C. (1930) as a way to pay tribute to the receiving state. In contrast, the façade of the Dutch purpose-built

chancery (1964) in Washington, D.C. was made of exposed bricks originating from the province of North Brabant to accentuate Dutch building tradition on American soil⁷⁰.

From the outside the large copper made Belgian coat of arms and the seals of the nine provinces were strategically placed above the main entrance accentuating the presence of the Belgian state in the chancery building. Judging from the design of other ministerial building projects at the time, the incorporation of such an explicit reference was highly unusual in Belgian embassy architecture. In the case of the Belgian purpose-built chancery (1961) in Canberra, national elements in the design were reduced to a bare minimum as only the Belgian flag and the small national coat of arms mounted on the left hand side expressed national identity on Australian soil.

With the Washington chancery serving as a noteworthy exception, the apparent lack of national references in the façades of Belgian purpose-built embassies runs like a thread through the Ministry's building activity at the time. Whereas the US State Department followed a conscious strategy in which the principles of modernist architecture were intertwined with typical American symbols such as the bald eagle in the façade of purpose-built chanceries, the kind of architecture representing the Belgian state abroad was far more diverse. As *A/Matériel* awarded commissions on turnkey basis and apparently did not set any guidelines to accentuate national identity by means of embassy architecture, it was predominantly the personal preferences of the local architect which influenced the design of Belgian embassies. This unguided and ad hoc approach resulted in a diverse patrimony of purpose-built embassies whose designs had the tendency to blend in with

67. LAWRENCE VALE, *Architecture, Power and National Identity*, New Haven (Connecticut), 1992, p. 66-67.

68. HANNES PIETERS, *Bouwen voor de Natie. De Albertina op de Brusselse Kunstberg als Monumentaal Totaalproject*, Gent, 2012, p. 155.

69. GUTHEIM AND LEE, *Worthy of the Nation...*, p. 167; LAURENT STALDER, "Turning Architecture Inside Out: Revolving Doors and Other Threshold Devices", In *Journal of Design History*, nr. 22, 2009 (1), p. 69-77.

70. HÉLÈNE DAMEN, "Sober Nederlands vlagvertoon. Naoorlogse ambassadegebouwen in Washington en Bonn", in *Bulletin KNOB*, nr. 118, 2019 (4), p. 42.

its foreign surroundings. In 1959, for instance, the Polish state struck a deal with the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in which the latter would reconstruct the neoclassical Mniszech Palace situated in Warsaw's historic centre to house the new Belgian embassy⁷¹. Meanwhile, halfway across the world, *A/Matériel* hired the Brazilian architect Nicolai Fikoff to design a low-rise chancery building with typical horizontal windows to blend in with the modernist architecture which dominates Brasilia⁷². In the literature on diplomatic history, scholars have described the phenomenon of 'localitis' in which diplomatic agents stationed abroad for a long period of time could lose touch with the home front and feel more attached to the receiving state⁷³. Apart from diplomats 'going native', localitis is also a useful concept to describe Belgium's embassy architecture in the 1950s and 1960s.

Judging from the chancery's exteriors, it seems the Washington design was also a prime example of 'localitis'. The interiors, however, shed another light on the design as Hugo Van Kuyck and Ralph Walker invested considerably in "[...] materials which might be used from both Belgium and the Belgian Congo"⁷⁴. Whereas the chancery's façade blended in with Washington's government architecture, its interiors were envisaged by the architects as venue for cultural diplomacy accentuating Belgian identity and craftsmanship by means of applied materials. Upon accessing the chancery through the revolving doors, visitors entered the grand lobby with its high ceiling giving an additional effect of space and light. At the back of the lobby the architects opted for a spiral staircase – functioning as a dynamic feature – which leads to the mezzanine level and the offices of the diplomatic staff discussed in the following part. Strategically opting for 'national' applied materials in this most public area of the building, the lobby's stair steps and pillars were covered with Belgian

black marble – the *Noir Belge* – delved in the quarries of Namur. Furthermore, the lobby's concrete walls were covered by plywood panels made of the limba tree originating from the Belgian Congo. Intended to accentuate Belgium's status as colonial power in Central Africa, it is remarkable and even somewhat controversial from a political point of view that Van Kuyck and his American partners chose Congolese wood to represent the Belgian state on American soil. From the mid-1950s onwards, the United States increasingly propagated African self-determination as a response to the strong anticolonial rhetoric of the Soviet Union at the time. In this regard, the US State Department urged European countries such as Belgium to dissolve their colonial empires by speeding up the process of decolonisation⁷⁵. Although there is no evidence in writing that the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs consciously selected the Congolese wood for the chancery's lobby, its presence on American soil was clearly not seen as problematic by Brussels at the time.

Ironically, however, the Congo gained its independence in 1960 – just three years following the chancery's completion – which turned the limba wood panels into a relic of the past overnight. Notwithstanding this decolonisation, the Belgian state and entrepreneurs continued to interfere in Congolese affairs such as supporting the secession of the resource rich province of Katanga where the first Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba (1925-1961) was murdered by his political opponents and Belgian mercenaries in January 1961. As the assassination of Lumumba fuelled anti-Belgian sentiments across the globe, demonstrations were held in front of Belgian diplomatic and consular missions in over sixty cities ranging from Bangkok to Bogota in mid-February 1961. Serving as the most tangible Belgian symbol in the streetscape of Washington, D.C., the chancery's limestone façade

71. KWIATKOWSKI, *The Mniszech Palace in Warsaw...*, p. 44.

72. File on Brasilia (Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Personnel & Organisation Archives*).

73. BERRIDGE AND LLOYD, *The Palgrave Macmillan Dictionary of Diplomacy*, p. 235.

74. Presentation booklet 'the Belgian Chancellery' (FAA, architect Hugo Van Kuyck, *bouwkundig archief, Belgische ambassade, Washington, USA, 28#9562*, unnumbered pages).

75. JONATHAN E. HELMREICH, "US Foreign Policy and the Belgian Congo in the 1950s", in *The Historian*, nr. 58, 1996 (2), p. 315-328.



Sketch of the chancery's lobby (FAA, architect Hugo Van Kuyck, 28#9562, presentation booklet 'the Belgian Chancellery', unnumbered pages. Despite substantial enquiries, JBH has not been able to find the copyright holders of this work. They are kindly requested to contact the editors).

was pelted with snowballs and eggs by a small group of college students on 15 February 1961⁷⁶.

Although no ministerial evaluation in writing has been retrieved, it seems *A/Matériel* was pleased with the design entry of Van Kuyck and Voorhees, Walker, Smith and Smith as only minor alterations were made to the original plan submitted in 1954. For instance, the large Belgian coat of arms made of copper flanked by the seals of the nine provinces was downsized to just the coat of arms and was sculpted in the limestone façade of the chancery. Based on the ministry's track record, it is not that far-fetched to argue that financial incentives lie at the basis of this alteration. Furthermore, the spiral staircase was modified to a double staircase. Reflecting the Ministry's hands-off approach, it was up to the architects involved to find a building contractor to actually build the chancery. Whereas the Ministry called upon Ambassador Silvercruys to find an architect, Voorhees, Walker, Smith and Smith did launch a tender process on 4 November 1955. Going through the general conditions, it becomes apparent that the time of completion put forward by the bidders was a major factor in awarding this commission as the chancery was ought to be completed in less than ten months⁷⁷. Eventually, the American building contractor John McShain (1898-1989) came out on top.

Taking over the Philadelphia based family business in 1919, John McShain by the mid-1950s was a well-established contractor running one of the ten largest building firms in the United States. His building activity mainly centred on the American capital which earned him the nickname of "the man who built Washington, D.C." as his company constructed the Jefferson memorial (1939-1943), Washington National Airport (1940-1941), the

Pentagon (1941-1943) and carried out the extensive renovation of the White House (1949-1951)⁷⁸. In addition to his esteemed reputation, practical considerations also incentivised Voorhees, Walker, Smith and Smith to call upon the services of John McShain Inc. to erect the embassy offices. Firstly, the engineers employed at McShain Inc. were accustomed to state-of-the-art building techniques such as cast-in-place concrete which significantly reduced construction time⁷⁹. Secondly, Indiana limestone – the main feature of the chancery's façade – was intrinsically linked to the business dealings of John McShain. In an effort to tighten his grip on the American building industry and supply his firm with a continuous flow of building materials, he bought the Indiana Limestone Company in 1950. As such, it was in the best interest of both the architectural firm and the Ministry to hire the man who built Washington, D.C. to construct the embassy offices at Garfield Street. On 26 January 1956 McShain Inc. started cutting down the trees on the building plot at Garfield Street and the construction works were completed by the end of the year⁸⁰.

IV. The Washington Chancery: A Hybrid and Artistic Work Environment

From the chancery's earliest conception back in April 1947 until its completion almost a decade later, the dynamics of Belgian diplomatic practice had changed fundamentally. Following the end of the Second World War, the Belgian state formally ended its neutrality policy and embraced the multilateral system which became the bedrock of the post-war world order⁸¹. With the growing importance of multilateralism in Belgian foreign policy, several ministry departments – including

76. Télégramme 95 de Louis Scheyven à Jean Van den Bosch (DAB, 18.678 *Patrice Lumumba – Décès 1961 Manifestations – Protestations, Préliminaires*, 16 February 1961, p. 2).

77. Instructions to Bidders (Hagley Museum and Library, *John McShain Papers, BOX OS 54, Folder 4 Belgian Chancellery*, 4 November 1955, p. 1).

78. *The New York Times*, 19 September 1989, p. 25.

79. CARL M. BRAUER, *The Man Who Built Washington: A Life of John McShain*, Wilmington, 1996.

80. *Le Soir*, 26 January 1956, p. 2

81. PETER CALVOCORESSI, *World Politics since 1945*, Harlow, 2009, p. 739-741.

Agriculture, Colonial Affairs, Defence and Economic Affairs – became increasingly involved in the international dimension of their domestic area of competence. Poised to tighten their grip on Belgium's foreign policy, these ministries argued their officials would be far more capable to protect their specific interests abroad than the diplomats of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In this context, these departments dispatched their own officials – more commonly known as attachés – to Belgian chanceries far and wide⁸². As one can imagine, this influx of attachés also caused tensions with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which perceived foreign matters as its own prerogative⁸³. This troublesome relationship between Belgian diplomats and attachés becomes apparent in the parliamentary speech made by the Liberal politician René Lefebvre (1893-1976) on 16 June 1948:

“Les fonctionnaires du ministère de l’agriculture qui sont arrivés dans les ambassades pour y remplir le rôle d’attachés agricoles, ont été souvent reçus en intrus. Dans beaucoup de cas, on les regardait avec indifférence, sinon avec une certaine méfiance”⁸⁴.

In the case of the Washington chancery, the number of attachés had risen from just two in 1945 to six by 1957 which included three military attachés, one agricultural, one scientific and one colonial⁸⁵. In addition to accommodating the offices of attachés, the Washington chancery increasingly had to accommodate Belgian delegations – usually spearheaded by a minister – travelling to the American capital to attend high-level conferences and summits from the mid-1940s onwards⁸⁶. Reflecting the ambassador's aspiration to house his regular diplomatic staff, the attachés

and ministerial delegations under the same roof, Van Kuyck and Voorhees, Walker, Smith and Smith provided over thirty offices for this hybrid workforce situated on the first floor. To accentuate the importance of the political section, the windows were accentuated “[...] in height to lend dignity to the more important rooms”⁸⁷. In order to give staff members sufficient privacy and a greater sense of ownership about their workspace, the architects opted for a cellular office layout running through the length of the first floor.

The spatial layout gives an indication on the hierarchy within the embassy staff. Located at the end of the northern part of the corridor, Silvercruys was given the largest individual office. As head of mission, he enjoyed the benefits of having two balconies, a private dressing and toilet. To further accentuate the room's importance, the office featured a ceiling accentuated in height and a walnut wood flooring⁸⁸. In the vicinity of the ambassador's office, the offices of his senior diplomats and typists were clustered together in the northern corridor. In contrast, the offices of junior diplomats and attachés were accommodated on the other side of the political section reflecting the somewhat strained relationship between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the attachés working for other ministerial departments. This was also reflected in the separate staircases found in the northern and southern part of the political section. Seven offices remained unassigned in order to provide office space to temporary guests such as Belgian ministers participating at international conferences in the contemporary *Caput Mundi*.

One of these temporary guests in need of an office was the Belgian Foreign Minister Pierre Wigny

82. VINCENT DELCORPS, *Dans les coulisses de la diplomatie...*, p. 123.

83. COOLSAET, DUJARDIN AND ROOSSENS, *Buitenlandse Zaken in België...*, p. 294.

84. Plenary session of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives of 16 June 1948 (Plenum.be, proceedings of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, 16 June 1948, p. 4).

85. Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Annuaire Diplomatique et Consulaire*, 1957, p. 87.

86. DELCORPS, *Dans les coulisses de la diplomatie...*, p. 122.

87. Presentation booklet ‘the Belgian Chancellery’ (FAA, architect Hugo Van Kuyck, *bouwkundig archief, Belgische ambassade, Washington, USA, 28#9562*, unnumbered pages).

88. *Le Soir*, 10 February 1957, p. 6.

(1905-1986) of the Christian Social Party. In his memoirs Wigny indicates how Silvercruys ran a tight ship at the chancery and fondly recalls how the attachés would make fun of the ambassador's eye for detail:

“Curieuse figure que celle de Silvercruys. D’un goût presque féminin pour les arts domestiques; l’ordre matériel régnant à l’ambassade était célèbre dans les milieux diplomatiques. Les attachés aimaient à répéter une plaisanterie innocente. Ils déplacent subrepticement une revue ou un bibelot et calculent le nombre de minutes qu’il faut à l’ambassadeur pour constater le désordre et remettre l’objet à sa place”⁸⁹.

As construction works entered their final phase in the winter of 1956, the ambassador's involvement in the chancery project reached new heights. Following his activities as a dedicated real estate agent and fundraiser, he now took on the role of interior designer. Notwithstanding the abundance of office furniture spread across the three current properties accommodating Belgian diplomats and attachés in late 1956, the ambassador wanted to purchase brand-new office furniture to accentuate the purpose-built chancery as a state-of-the-art work environment. At the time, *A/Matériel* did have a purchasing process in place when it came to furnishing its diplomatic and consular missions. For instance, on 15 December 1949, *A/Matériel* launched an extensive refurbishment of the interiors of the Belgian legation in Bern and invited four Belgian furniture manufacturers to submit their design proposals. Informing Foreign Minister Paul van Zeeland on its main criteria to select furniture, *A/Matériel* indicated how “[...] le travail sera confié à la maison dont le devis sera jugé le plus intéressant non seulement au point de vue prix mais aussi en tenant compte de la qualité du projet soumis”⁹⁰. Notwithstanding that the aesthetic qualities were explicitly mentioned

as assessment criteria, it speaks volumes that the price tag was listed first. In addition to evaluating building proposals for new embassies primarily in terms of money at the time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also put forward the financial aspect as main focus in assessing interior design projects for its diplomatic missions. Judging from its involvement in furnishing the Belgian legation in Switzerland, one would assume *A/Matériel* was also instrumental in selecting a furniture producer for the Washington chancery. Ambassador Silvercruys, however, simply bypassed the Ministry's logistical department and personally searched a furniture producer to do the job. From 1947 onwards the ambassador increasingly promoted Belgian brands in the United States as he sponsored several commercial exhibitions and set up meetings between Belgian entrepreneurs and chambers of commerce in different American cities.⁹¹ To benefit his economic agenda of ‘buying Belgian’, Baron Silvercruys hired the Belgian firm Kortrijkse Kunstwerkstede Gebroeders De Coene to furnish his new embassy offices.

Founded in 1887 the Courtrai-based family business De Coene was one of the leading Belgian companies in the furniture and wood industry by the mid-1950s. Originally De Coene made its mark on the domestic market for its luxurious art deco furniture during the interwar period. Its most notable commission featured the production of a rosewood desk for the Belgian monarch Leopold III (1901-1983) in 1935. During the Second World War this esteemed reputation was shattered as De Coene collaborated with the German military administration on an economical level by constructing dummy wooden aircrafts for the *Luftwaffe*. Following the liberation of Belgium in September 1944, De Coene was sequestered for its wartime activities by the Belgian state. As these restrictions were lifted in 1952, De Coene's new management was able to turn this negative pub-

⁸⁹. Unpublished memoirs of Pierre Wigny (State Archives of Belgium, *unpublished memoirs Pierre Wigny I 591*, H. à l’O.N.U., p. 32).

⁹⁰. Note pour monsieur le ministre (Archives Université Catholique de Louvain, *Papiers Paul van Zeeland*, 678 Affaires Etrangères Correspondence 1949-1950, 15 December 1949).

⁹¹. VANWING, *Ambassadeur Silvercruys ...*, p. 117-118.

licity around through a thorough reorientation of its commercial activities in the furniture and building industry. This included the production of glulam frames – consisting of glued laminated timber beams – which were used to accommodate sport and party halls, churches, workshops and even national pavilions at the Brussels world’s fair of 1958⁹². Coincidentally, De Coene’s furniture department obtained a license in 1954 to produce and sell furniture of the renowned American brand Knoll in the Benelux. In the 1950s Knoll was one of the leading furniture brands producing modern domestic and office furniture by esteemed designers such as Eero Saarinen (1910-1961) and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969)⁹³. Among others Van der Rohe’s iconic Barcelona chair – designed for the German pavilion at the world’s fair of 1929 – was manufactured in the workshops of De Coene. This refined design object comprising of a chromed steel framework and two leather cushions was used to furnish the lobbies of several high-profile companies in the Benelux. On top of its collaboration with Knoll, De Coene also established close ties with the armed forces of the United States. Following its wartime service to the *Luftwaffe*, De Coene redeemed itself as it took on work from the victors of the Second World War. As the United States Army Air Force faced difficulties to properly accommodate its military personnel and their families in France and North Africa, De Coene was hired by Uncle Sam to produce 1.800 trailers in 1955. Whether these transatlantic ties influenced Silvercruys to collaborate with the West Flemish furniture brand remains unclear, but it is striking to notice how the ambassador yet again contracted a partner with an outspoken American connection as was the case with architect Hugo Van Kuyck. Paradoxically, however, both the chancery’s design and its office furniture did not reflect Van Kuyck’s or De Coene’s modern

post-war reorientation which emerged from their intensive transatlantic collaboration.

Ignoring the innovative Knoll designs produced by De Coene, the ambassador instead opted for a traditional approach as he selected De Coene’s segment of period furniture to correspond with the stripped classicist appearance of the chancery building. Traditionally serving as a mark of wealth and luxury among the rich and famous, this period furniture was right down the ambassador’s alley. Back in February 1945, Silvercruys reached out to his friend Minister of Finance Camille Gutt – the éminence *grise* of the ambassador’s real estate endeavours – to purchase a new ambassadorial residence in the American capital. With Gutt raising the necessary funds, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was able to purchase a majestic mansion on Foxhall Road – a quiet north western residential neighbourhood – to serve as new ambassadorial residence⁹⁴. Completed in 1931, the limestone estate forms an evocation of the Parisian Neo-Renaissance Hôtel de Rothelin-Charolais constructed in 1703. With *hôtels particuliers* being one of the dominant building types to accommodate ambassadorial residences in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, it comes as no surprise that this architectural reproduction appeared on the radar of Ambassador Silvercruys⁹⁵. Before moving into his new residence, the ambassador hired the renowned French decorators Alavoine and Company to carry out an extensive refurbishment of the estate. Evocating the French Regency period (1715-1723), the residence’s interiors featured crystal chandeliers, parquet floors, Aubusson carpets and carved panelling imported from France⁹⁶. Wielding his new residence as a diplomatic tool, Silvercruys used the estate as a venue for intimate dinner parties and media interviews. As a result, the new ambassadorial residence of

92. RIKA DEVOS AND FREDIE FLORÉ, “Modern Wood: De Coene at Expo 58”, in *Construction History. Journal of the Construction History Society*, nr. 24, 2009, p. 109.

93. FREDIE FLORÉ, “Serving a Double Diplomatic Mission: Strategic Alliances between Belgian and American Furniture Companies in the Postwar Era,” in *Design and Culture*, nr. 9, 2017 (2), p. 167-185.

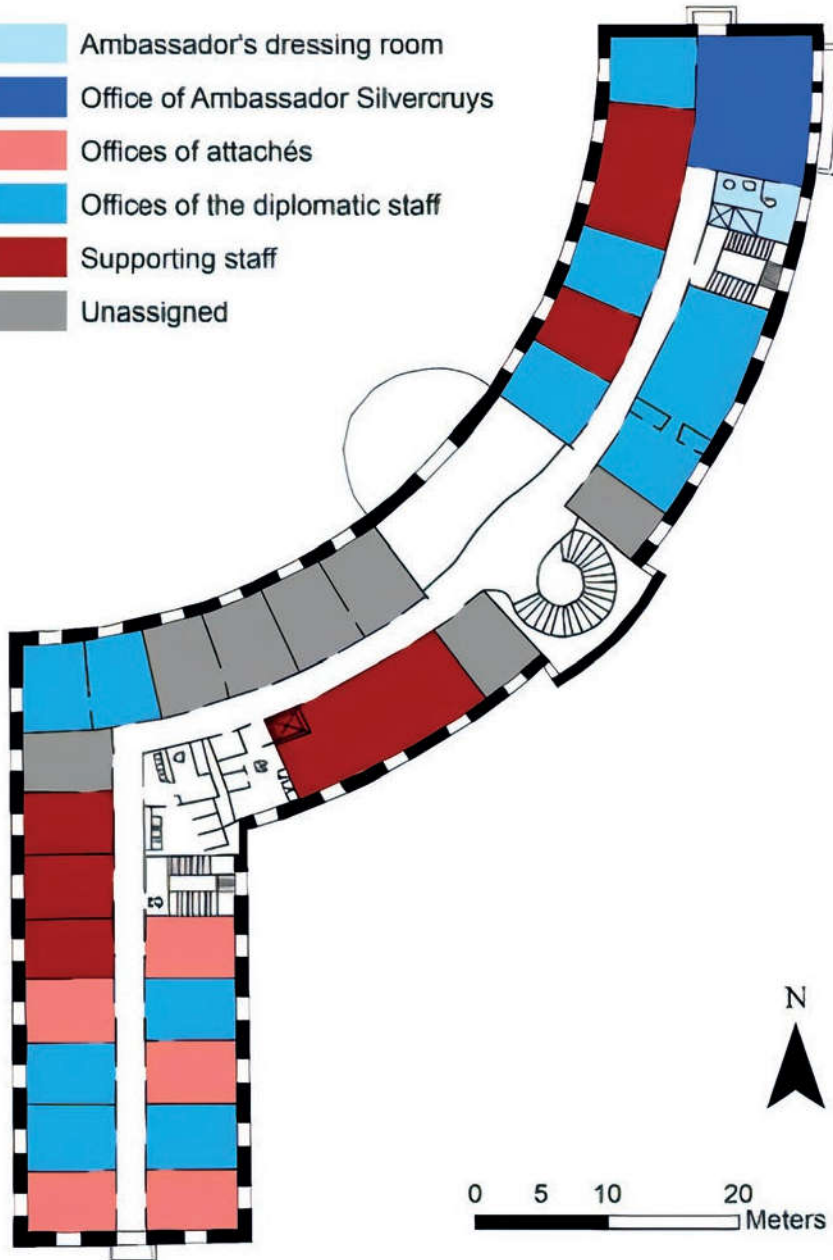
94. Letter of Georges Theunis to Robert Silvercruys (DAB, 18.434/3 *Papiers R. Silvercruys*, 19 February 1945).

95. ALEXANDRE GADY, *Les hôtels particuliers de Paris*, Paris, 2008, p. 272.

96. Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Belgian Embassy Washington*, Brussels, 2010, unnumbered pages.

Legend

- Ambassador's dressing room
- Office of Ambassador Silvercruys
- Offices of attachés
- Offices of the diplomatic staff
- Supporting staff
- Unassigned



The political section's spatial lay-out of the Belgian chancery. Made by Christophe De Coster, HOST Research Group, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (based on FAA, architect Hugo Van Kuyck, 28#9562, presentation booklet 'the Belgian Chancellery', unnumbered pages. Despite substantial enquiries, JBH has not been able to find the copyright holders of this work. They are kindly requested to contact the editors).

Belgium did not go unnoticed in the local press. Seeing the residence's aesthetic qualities as an indication of Belgium's political status, *The Washington Times Herald* commented: "Belgium is in good shape; Silvercruys lives in one of the most magnificent estates in Washington"⁹⁷.

Echoing his preference for French decorative arts and interior design, the ambassador selected De Coene's line of Neo-Empire furniture to furnish the Washington embassy offices. Taking its name from the First French Empire (1804-1814), Neo-Empire furniture forms a revival of this Napoleonic era and is characterized for its classical ornamentation, course carvings and dark finish. De Coene also produced decorative elements for the personal office of Ambassador Silvercruys. In addition to its size and applied materials, the room's importance within the chancery was further emphasised by two wooden soccles made by De Coene. Strategically flanking the ambassador's wooden desk, these soccles served as flag poles for the Belgian tricolour. The top of the flag pole on the left hand side comprised of a carved lion, a traditional emblem of the Belgian state. Above the personal desk of Silvercruys a state portrait of the Belgian monarch Baudouin (1930-1993) was placed suggesting the King of the Belgians was constantly looking over the shoulder of his diplomatic representative.

As De Coene's period furniture was delivered to the Belgian chancery in May 1957, Silvercruys personally wrote a letter of appreciation to the company's commercial director Pierre De Coene in which he accentuated how his new office furniture was worthy of representing Belgian craftsmanship abroad:

"Ce mobilier, qui a trouvé sa place dans notre nouvel immeuble, reflète à la fois la sobriété dans l'élégance du dessin, le meilleur goût dans le choix des couleurs et la perfection dans l'exécution. Il est à l'honneur de votre maison

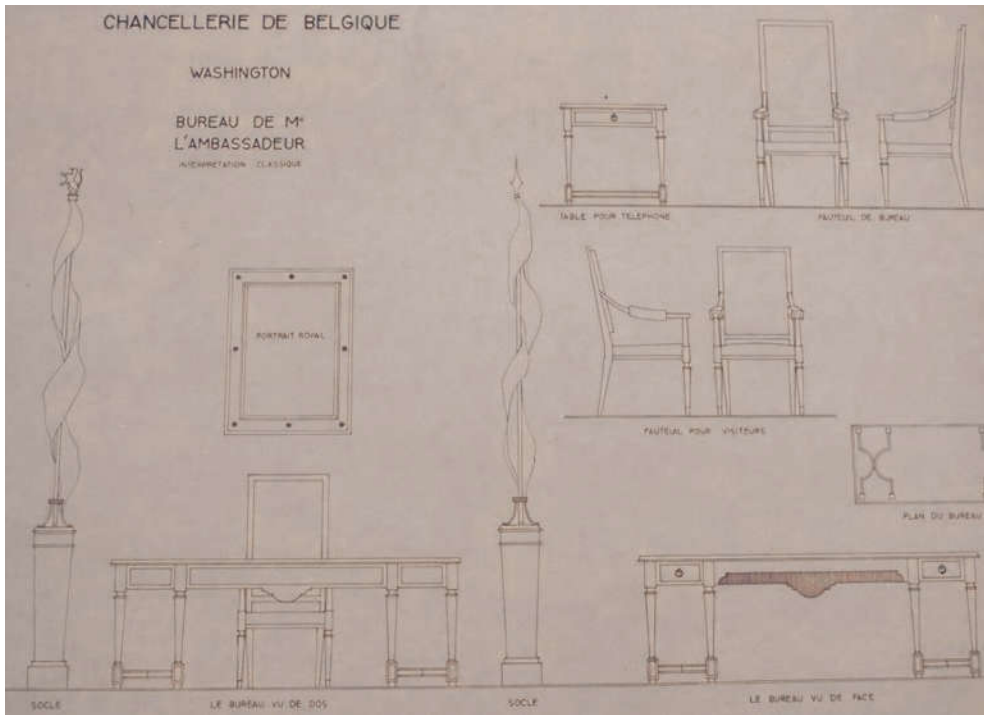
*et de tout son personnel comme à celui de cette Ambassade. Je vous remercie des soins que vous avez apportés à cette livraison et je vous suis reconnaissant de l'aimable attention que vous avez eue d'offrir à l'Ambassade, à l'intention de l'Ambassadrice, une charmante table à thé inscrite à l'inventaire du mobilier de la résidence"*⁹⁸.

One can assume De Coene offered Silvercruys the tea table free of charge as a token of gratitude for obtaining the high-profile commission. As Silvercruys bypassed *A/Matériel's* tendering process, the personal gift also illustrates once more that having close relationships with Belgian diplomats was of the utmost importance to win contracts for the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the 1950s. This aesthetic preference for period furniture was very common to furnish Belgian embassy buildings. Even in Brasilia the newly-built ambassadorial residence (1971) – an overall modern building project which responded to the symbolically charged modern context of the young capital city – was furnished and decorated in Louis XVI style. This preference for period furniture stands in stark contrast to the interiors of American embassies at the time. As discussed in the introduction, the US State Department purposefully erected modernist chanceries in the 1950s and 1960s to promote the United States as the progressive superpower *par excellence*. Acting on the advice of the modernist architects involved, the State Department made sure the embassy interiors matched the preferred architectural language of modernism at the time. Therefore, the US State Department furnished several purpose-built embassies with modern furniture crafted by well-reputed American firms such as Knoll and the Dunbar Furniture Corporation⁹⁹. In contrast, its Belgian counterpart – *A/Matériel* – could easily be bypassed by diplomats with the political weight of Silvercruys who could hand-pick office furniture that matched his preferences.

97. Newspaper clipping of the *Washington Times Herald* (DAB, 18.434/4 *Papiers R. Silvercruys*, 6 October 1947).

98. Letter of Robert Silvercruys to Pierre De Coene (Private collection of Noël Hostens, 3 May 1957).

99. LOEFFLER, *The Architecture of Diplomacy...*, p. 66-67; FÁTIMA POMBO AND HILDE HEYENEN, "Jules Wabbes and the Modern Design of American Embassies", in *Interiors*, nr. 5, 2014 (3), p. 315-339.



De Coene's sketches of Silvercruys' personal desk (Private collection of Noël Hostens).



The Louis XVI interiors of the Belgian residence in Brasilia (Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Personnel & Organisation Archives, file on Brasilia, 1974).

In addition to showcasing Belgian made furniture in the embassy offices, Baron Silvercruys also wielded artwork as an instrument of cultural diplomacy in the interiors of the new chancery. Acting on the suggestion made by architects, the Belgian senior diplomat opted to hang a tapestry in the lobby area to serve as the icing on the cake. Therefore, the baron came up with a creative solution which did not entail additional costs for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the context of the New York World's Fair of 1939 the Belgian Ministry of Economic Affairs commissioned the production of two large tapestries to decorate the interiors of the Belgian pavilion. These tapestries were based on two cartoons of the Belgian painter Floris Jespers (1889-1965) and were woven by the Brussels based manufacture Chaudoir and Malines based Braquenié. Once the world fair drew to a close, these artworks ended up in the hands of the Belgian embassy in the American capital. Both tapestries were clear examples of cultural diplomacy as they reflected not only Belgian craftsmanship but also resonated strong political messages through the medium of art. The largest tapestry depicted the efforts of the Commission for the Relief in Belgium, an American organisation which raised money to set up a steady supply of food to German occupied Belgium during the First World War. The American businessman and future president Herbert Hoover (1874-1964) served as the Commission's chairman and was prominently displayed on the tapestry. Reflecting the ambassador's efforts to wield Belgian art as an instrument to cement bilateral ties with America, Silvercruys donated the tapestry to the Hoover Institute in 1952¹⁰⁰. Such a donation was exemplary for his efforts to promote national art across the Atlantic as he regularly supported Belgian art expositions in the United States¹⁰¹. Envisioning his newly-built chancery as a venue for cultural diplomacy, Silvercruys hung the second tapestry originally made in

the context of the New York World's Fair in the lobby of his new chancery. Strategically positioned at the main staircase leading to the political section, the tapestry showed the missionary Louis Hennepin (1626-1704) who left Hainaut to explore the Mississippi region. Depicting an idealized common past connecting modern-day Belgium and the United States with one another, the tapestry resonated strong political messages by labelling Christianity as the bedrock between the 'old' and 'new' world.

As the chancery was officially inaugurated by Minister Spaak on 9 February 1957, its design was well received on both sides of the Atlantic for different reasons. The local press in Washington, D.C. primarily addressed its functionality emphasising how: "[...] the completion of the chancery will consolidate Belgian government offices now housed in three separate buildings"¹⁰². The Belgian media on the other hand accentuated its aesthetic qualities. In a moment of chauvinism a journalist of the Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* labelled the "[...] *nouveau siège de l'ambassade de Belgique l'un des plus beaux immeubles de Washington*"¹⁰³. The newly-built chancery was also perceived as a model example in the echelons of Belgian politics. In the margins of a parliamentary debate on the necessity of improving the working conditions in chanceries on 19 May 1959, the former Liberal Minister of Public Works Adolphe Van Glabbeke (1904-1959) stated how the Washington chancery was an exemplary building project which should set the standard for subsequent building projects¹⁰⁴. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also seemed pleased with the final result. Although no written evaluation has been found, it is telling how the Ministry awarded both Hugo Van Kuyck and De Coene additional commissions. Whereas Van Kuyck became the Ministry's preferred architect renovating diplomatic missions

100. *Le Soir*, 13 March 1953, p. 1.

101. *Le Soir*, 5 February 1952, p. 2; *Le Soir*, 18 February 1954, p. 2.

102. Newspaper clipping of the *Sunday Star* (DAB, 18.434/8 *Papiers R. Silvercruys*, 10 February 1957).

103. *Le Soir*, 10 February 1957, p. 1.

104. Plenary session of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives of 19 May 1959 (Plenum.be, proceedings of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, 19 May 1959, p. 16).

in Bangkok (1958), Caracas (1958) and the new ministry building at the Quatre Bras in Brussels, De Coene was hired to furnish embassies in Canberra, Copenhagen and Moscow in the 1950s¹⁰⁵. During the inauguration of the Washington chancery, Foreign Minister Spaak also awarded architect Ralph Walker and building contractor John McShain the Order of the Crown – one of Belgium’s highest national honorary orders of knighthood – and thanked them in his speech for “ [...] the fulfilment of a dream which I have had, and which Ambassador Baron Silvercruys has had, for some years”¹⁰⁶. One can only wonder what went through the mind of Ambassador Silvercruys as one of the main opponents towards commissioning the chancery took credit upon its completion.

V. Conclusion

Judging from the excerpts of Spaak’s speech during the inauguration of the chancery on 9 February 1957, the attending members of the *corps diplomatique* and the US State Department could have easily gotten the impression that the new Belgian embassy offices were the result of a closely monitored and guided building policy put in place by the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This article, however, has told a very different story. Reflecting its preference to purchase or lease properties abroad instead of constructing embassies at the time, the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was anything but a well-oiled organisation when it came to commissioning embassy buildings in the 1950s. Instead, it was Ambassador Silvercruys who played a pivotal role in commissioning the new Washington chancery in the 1950s. Confronted with a growing diplomatic staff scattered across different offices in Washington, D.C., Silvercruys initiated the construction of a new chancery building as he personally led the search for a building plot, the necessary funds, and an architect. Notwithstanding strong opposition within the Ministry’s

walls, the ambassador’s perseverance and good relations with the ruling Christian Social Party made sure the building project was greenlighted in 1954. One can only wonder whether another Belgian ambassador – without the necessary contacts among the upper echelons of Brussels or posted in a politically less significant capital – would have been able to pull this off in a similar fashion as Silvercruys had done.

Lacking the necessary experience to manage building projects at the time, the Ministry’s real estate department awarded this commission on turnkey basis which provided the architects involved with plenty of room for manoeuvre. Filling up the void left by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it were the architects involved that approached this commission as a way to pay tribute to the transatlantic alliance by means of architecture. Designed by Belgian and American architects, the chancery made reference to the receiving and sending state making it both a product of architectural localities and cultural diplomacy. Whereas its stripped classicist exteriors paid tribute to Washington’s government architecture at the time, the sculpted coat of arms and the chancery’s interiors accentuated Belgium’s presence by means of applied materials originating from Belgium and the Belgian Congo. This stands in stark contrast to the design of contemporary Belgian purpose-built embassies in Warsaw and Brasilia which blended in with their architectural surroundings and lacked clear national elements of representation.

The representational character of the Washington chancery was further accentuated by Ambassador Silvercruys. Seeing his new embassy offices to be more than just a new work environment, the senior diplomat used his new chancery as a venue for cultural diplomacy by showcasing Belgian made office furniture and artwork which resonated strong political messages. Corresponding with the baron’s preference for period styles, both the chancery’s

105. Unfortunately, no archival records or photographs of these furnishing projects could be retrieved.

106. Newspaper clippings of the *Sunday Star* and the *Washington Post and Times Herald* (DAB, 18.434/7 *Papiers R. Silvercruys*, 10 February 1957).

architecture and interior design featured neo-styles instead of state-of-the-art designs of the architects and furniture producer involved. As such, the new Belgian chancery in the American capital was indeed approached as an opportunity to cement the transatlantic alliance. The different actors involved, however, had substantially different views as to how this diplomatic building actually cemented this Belgian-American alliance. Whereas the Ministry saw the construction of a spacious and well-staffed chancery *an sich* as a token of recognition for America's importance in Belgian foreign policy, the architects and Ambassador Silvercruys went one step further as they opted to showcase Belgian and American craftsmanship by means of architecture, furniture and art. As such, this Belgian case study shows that one should be wary of interpreting purpose-built embassies – even the most politically charged ones in terms of architecture – by default as closely monitored and guided building projects in which governments aim to project ideological and national visions.

In December 2019 the architectural legacy of the ambassadorship of Robert Silvercruys to the United States lost its prominent place in the diplomatic patrimony of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. According to Foreign Minister Didier Reynders, the chancery at Garfield Street had become too spacious as not all of the offices were being used¹⁰⁷. As the embassy offices were relocated to an anonymous office building in the city centre of Washington, D.C., the chancery at Garfield Street changed hands as the Belgian state sold the premises to the Vietnamese government for 23 million US dollars¹⁰⁸. It is somewhat ironic that this building – intended to showcase Belgium's commitment to the transatlantic alliance in the 1950s – was later on sold to one of the last communist regimes in the world. Whereas Belgian media have primarily labelled the chancery's sale as yet another effort to balance the derailed federal budget, this move may also be an indication of the transatlantic alliance's diminishing importance in the current state of international affairs.

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107. *De Standaard*, 10 August 2019, p. 29.

108. "Belgium sells its D.C. embassy to another foreign delegation", website of *Washington Business Journal*, 12 December 2019, <<https://www.bizjournals.com/washington/news/2019/12/12/belgium-sells-its-d-c-embassy-for-to-another.html>>, accessed online on 31 May 2021.