

The RondBouw of Kasteel van Westmalle: A Comprehensive Historical and Architectural Study

I. Executive Summary

The RondBouw, a distinctive circular service building with a conical roof at Westmalle Castle, stands as a unique architectural anomaly in Belgium, presumed to have been constructed around 1841. While its precise original purpose remains a subject of historical ambiguity, it is widely understood to have functioned as a staff residence, coach house, and stables. Designated a protected monument since 1981, the RondBouw, along with the entire castle domain, was acquired by Stichting Kempens Landschap in 2021, marking a new era of public -oriented heritage preservation. Facing years of vacancy and deterioration, significant restoration efforts are slated to commence in late 2025, aiming to revert its interior to its original open layout by removing later additions. This revitalization is driven by a vision to transform the RondBouw into a vibrant, publicly accessible space, potentially for hospitality or exhibitions, thereby ensuring its sustainable future and enhancing its community value.

II. Introduction: Setting the Historical Stage

The Kasteel van Westmalle, nestled in the picturesque Campine region of Flanders, Belgium, possesses a storied past that traces its origins back to approximately 1100. Initially conceived as a fortified farm known as the Mansus de Trissche or Hoeve Ten Driessche, the estate served as a residence for the representatives of the Dukes of Brabant until 1449.¹ Over the centuries, ownership transitioned through a succession of influential noble families, each leaving an indelible mark on its architectural and

historical fabric. The Van der Moelen family acquired the estate in 1449, followed by the De Cottereau family in 1530, who were responsible for constructing the present castle in 1561.¹ The Pauwens family resided in the castle until 1847, after which it saw further significant transformations.¹

Periods of notable restoration and alteration were undertaken by various proprietors. Baron de Norman initiated restoration efforts in 1829. Subsequently, Lord Bovie, an Antwerp diamond-dealer, owned the castle between 1848 and 1874, during which he not only altered and restored the structure but also commissioned the renowned landscape architect Koelich to create its accompanying garden.¹ Baron de Turck de Kersbeeck, who purchased the estate in 1878, further reshaped the castle to its current appearance, engaging the expertise of Antwerp architect J. Schadde for extensive restoration and rebuilding.¹ The van der Straten Waillet family held ownership from 1914 until 2021, when the domain was acquired by Stichting Kempens Landschap, a foundation dedicated to the protection of Flemish landscapes and heritage.¹ The entire domain, including its impressive 1650 castle-church driveway, has been recognized as a protected cultural-historical landscape since 1977, with the castle itself classified as a protected monument.³

The extensive history of the main castle, encompassing its diverse owners and the architectural interventions they commissioned, provides a crucial backdrop for understanding the RondBouw. The periods of significant investment and architectural renovation on the main estate suggest a broader commitment to the domain's aesthetic and functional development. This would naturally have influenced the construction or modification of ancillary buildings like the RondBouw, positioning it not as an isolated structure but as an integral part of a continuously evolving aristocratic estate. Understanding the castle's historical timeline is therefore foundational to comprehending the RondBouw's place within this grand narrative.

This report aims to provide an in-depth, meticulously researched historical and architectural examination of a specific, yet enigmatic, ancillary structure within this historic estate: the RondBouw. The analysis will delve into its unique characteristics, explore its debated historical functions, detail the current preservation initiatives, and outline its envisioned future, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of this remarkable Belgian heritage asset.

III. The RondBouw: Origins and Architectural Identity

A. Architectural Description

The RondBouw is architecturally distinguished by its striking circular form and a prominent conical roof. ² This unique design sets it apart within Belgium's historical building landscape. Sources explicitly describe it as "a unicum" (a unique specimen) and "enig" (singular or unique) in the country, underscoring its exceptional rarity. ² This unusual architectural style contributes significantly to its "characteristic" and "remarkable" status within the Westmalle Castle domain. ⁷ The repeated emphasis on its uniqueness by various historical accounts and heritage descriptions highlights its exceptional architectural value and signifies the importance of its preservation. Its distinctiveness renders it a focal point of the entire domain, drawing attention to its profound historical and cultural significance.

B. Dating and Early Mentions

The construction of the RondBouw is generally presumed to have occurred in 1841. ² This dating places its creation within a period of dynamic changes and restorations at the main castle. During this era, the castle was under the ownership of the Pauwens family until 1847, after which it passed to Lord Bovie from 1848. ¹ The construction of such a distinctive ancillary building during this time suggests it was likely part of broader efforts to enhance or modernize the estate's infrastructure and aesthetic appeal.

C. Heritage Status

The RondBouw holds official recognition as a protected monument, a designation it received on October 23, 1981.⁵ This protection extends its significance beyond its

immediate architectural form, embedding it within the broader protected cultural - historical landscape of Kasteel van Westmalle, which itself was protected earlier in 1977.³ This dual layer of protection underscores its profound importance to regional heritage, affirming its status as a valuable and irreplaceable historical asset.

Table 1: Key Historical and Architectural Data of the RondBouw

Attribute	Description	Source References
Architectural Form	Circular building with conical roof	2
Presumed Construction Year	1841	2
Heritage Status	Protected Monument (since Oct 23, 1981); Part of Protected Cultural - Historical Landscape (since 1977)	3
Known Historical Functions (with caveats on "original" purpose)	Staff residence, coach house, stables (Note: Original purpose also cited as a mystery)	2
Rarity	Unique in Belgium	2

IV. Unraveling the Past: Function and Evolution

A. Historical Interpretations of Purpose

The historical function of the RondBouw is a topic of some discussion among the available historical accounts. One perspective, articulated in recent reports concerning the castle's future, states that it was "formerly the staff residence where

also the coaches and horses stood".⁷ This description is further supported by a direct reference to it as a "19th-century round coach house".⁶ This interpretation suggests that the RondBouw served as a multi-functional service building, accommodating both human habitation for the estate's staff and logistical needs related to the stabling of horses and storage of coaches. Such a combination of uses would have been practical for a large historical estate, centralizing various support functions.

B. The Enigma of Its Initial Role

In contrast to these specific functional descriptions, another historical source explicitly states that "The origin and the initial destination of this building remain a mystery".² This statement highlights a lingering historical ambiguity, suggesting that while the later or long-standing uses of the RondBouw might be well-documented and widely accepted, its very first purpose immediately following its presumed construction in 1841 may not be definitively recorded. This apparent contradiction in historical sources is not necessarily a factual error but rather reflects the complexities inherent in historical documentation, where initial intents may be lost to time while subsequent, more prolonged uses become the established historical narrative. Thus, while the absolute initial purpose might lack explicit records, its role as a coach house and staff residence became its prominent and well-attested historical function. This nuanced understanding allows for a comprehensive historical account that acknowledges both certainty and lingering questions.

C. Structural Modifications Over Time

The current restoration plans for the RondBouw provide compelling indirect evidence of its functional evolution and the architectural responses to changing needs over time. The project's primary objective is to return the RondBouw to its "original layout".⁷ This ambitious undertaking involves the removal of "later added inner walls" to create a "large open space" within the structure.⁷ The presence of these "later added inner walls" strongly suggests that the RondBouw underwent significant internal reconfigurations at some point in its history. This physical alteration of the

interior space would have been a direct response to evolving functional requirements or the preferences of different owners. For instance, an initial open space might have been subdivided to create more distinct living quarters or specialized storage areas as the needs of the castle changed. The decision to revert to an open layout in the current restoration demonstrates a modern approach to adaptive reuse, where the original spatial qualities are restored to allow for greater flexibility in future functions. This planned architectural change underscores how buildings adapt to human needs across different eras, and how contemporary heritage preservation can involve undoing past alterations to restore original spatial qualities for future versatility.

V. Preservation and Restoration: A New Chapter

A. Acquisition and Vision

The Kasteel van Westmalle domain, including the distinctive RondBouw, entered a new phase of its long history following the passing of Baroness Christiane van der Straten Waillet in 2021.¹ Subsequently, the entire estate was acquired by Stichting Kempens Landschap, a foundation dedicated to the preservation of Flemish landscapes and heritage.¹ This acquisition was not a solitary endeavor but a collaborative effort, bolstered by significant financial contributions from both the municipality of Malle and the province of Antwerp.⁸ The Foundation's explicit vision for the domain is to secure its "sustainable future" and to ensure the enduring preservation of this "unique piece of heritage".³ This aligns with their broader organizational mission, which emphasizes the protection and revitalization of cultural landscapes and historical assets for future generations.

B. Current State and Urgency for Restoration

Prior to the current preservation initiatives, the RondBouw had unfortunately stood

vacant for several years.⁶ This prolonged period of disuse and neglect naturally led to a state that necessitates comprehensive restoration. The vacancy underscores the urgency of the ongoing preservation efforts; without intervention, such a unique and historically significant structure would face continued deterioration, potentially jeopardizing its long-term viability and the ability to fulfill its future potential. The current restoration is therefore a critical step in safeguarding this architectural rarity.

C. Detailed Restoration Plan

The restoration works on the RondBouw are meticulously planned and are scheduled to commence in late 2025.⁷ The primary objective of this extensive project is to restore the RondBouw to what is described as its "original layout".⁷ This involves a significant architectural intervention: the removal of "later added inner walls" to create a "large open space" within the building.⁷ This approach suggests a deliberate effort to revert the interior to a more versatile and adaptable configuration, likely reflecting its initial structural design before subsequent subdivisions were introduced.

Financially, the total estimated cost for the restoration of the RondBouw is approximately €1.5 million, excluding VAT.³ This substantial figure highlights the scale and complexity of the work required to bring the building back to its intended state. A significant portion of this funding, specifically €375,000, has already been secured through a grant from Onroerend Erfgoed (Real Estate Heritage), a key heritage preservation agency.³ A comprehensive grant application dossier was submitted in February 2024, with the final decision on the full grant amount anticipated in June 2024.⁶ The considerable financial commitment from public and heritage organizations, evidenced by the estimated cost and secured grant, underscores the high perceived value and importance of the RondBouw as a heritage asset. This level of investment indicates that the authorities and the foundation recognize the building's historical and architectural significance as warranting such a considerable expenditure.

Furthermore, the strategic choice to restore the RondBouw to a "large open space" by removing "later added inner walls" facilitates its future adaptive reuse. This architectural decision is not merely about historical accuracy but serves a pragmatic purpose, making the building highly suitable for new functions such as a hospitality

venue (horeca) or an exhibition space. ⁶ This approach demonstrates a modern philosophy in heritage preservation, where structural integrity and historical character are maintained, but interior spaces are made flexible to accommodate new, economically viable functions. This ensures the building's continued relevance and financial sustainability, preventing it from falling into disrepair again due to a lack of purpose or funding.

Table 2: RondBouw Restoration and Future Vision Summary

Aspect	Details	Source References
Current Owner	Stichting Kempens Landschap	⁷
Current State	Vacant for years, needs comprehensive restoration	⁶
Restoration Start Date	Late 2025	⁷
Restoration Objective	Return to original open layout (remove inner walls)	⁷
Estimated Restoration Cost	€1.5 million (excl. VAT)	³
Secured Grant Amount	€375,000 (from Onroerend Erfgoed)	³
Future Purpose Search	Public call for partners (deadline Feb 24, 2025)	⁸
Potential New Uses	Hospitality (horeca), exhibition space	⁶
Guiding Principles for New Use	Respect heritage, sound business plan, public value/enjoyment	⁷

VI. Future Prospects: Re -imagining the RondBouw

A. The Search for New Purpose

With the comprehensive restoration efforts for the RondBouw firmly planned, Stichting Kempens Landschap and the municipality of Malle have embarked on a proactive search for its future purpose. This initiative involves a public call for partners, inviting individuals and organizations to propose innovative new uses for the RondBouw.⁷ The call specifically seeks "creative knights" with bold ideas for a "sustainable and economic re -purposing" of the building. ⁷ The deadline for submitting these proposals was set for February 24, 2025. ⁸ This open invitation reflects a collaborative approach to heritage management, aiming to harness external creativity and expertise to ensure the long -term vitality of the structure.

B. Potential Uses

Initial suggestions for the RondBouw's future uses include its transformation into a hospitality venue (horeca) or an exhibition space. ⁶ These proposed functions are particularly well -suited to the architectural changes planned during the restoration, specifically the creation of a "large open space" through the removal of later added inner walls.⁷ An open interior provides the flexibility necessary for diverse commercial or cultural activities, making it an attractive proposition for potential partners. The suitability of the restored space for such purposes demonstrates a forward -thinking approach to heritage management, where the physical restoration is directly aligned with the envisioned future utility.

C. Guiding Principles

The selection process for a new purpose for the RondBouw is guided by several key principles that extend beyond mere economic viability. Proposals must fundamentally respect the building's inherent heritage, ensuring that any new function is compatible

with its historical and architectural integrity. ⁸ Furthermore, a sound business plan is a mandatory requirement, emphasizing the need for the new purpose to be economically sustainable and contribute to the long-term financial health of the property.⁸

Crucially, a significant principle is that the chosen purpose must contribute to the "public value" of the domain, allowing the inhabitants of Malle to "royally enjoy" it.⁷ This explicit and repeated emphasis on public benefit signals a profound evolution in heritage management philosophy. It moves beyond mere structural preservation to a community-centric model where historical assets are revitalized to serve contemporary societal needs and enhance local quality of life. This approach seeks to foster a sense of ownership and connection between the community and its heritage, ensuring that the RondBouw remains a living part of Malle's social fabric. The existing public accessibility of the castle park since its acquisition sets a strong precedent for broader public engagement with the entire estate.⁷

The requirement for a "good business plan" for the RondBouw's new purpose, alongside suggestions for commercial uses like "horeca or an exhibition space," highlights a pragmatic approach to long-term heritage preservation. By enabling the building to generate revenue, the Stichting Kempens Landschap aims to ensure its financial self-sufficiency, reducing reliance on continuous external funding. This strategy is crucial for the enduring viability of historical properties in the 21st century, demonstrating a holistic approach that considers financial longevity as integral to successful preservation.

VII. Conclusion: A Landmark Reborn

The RondBouw of Kasteel van Westmalle presents a compelling case study in the modern practice of heritage preservation and adaptive reuse. From its enigmatic origins, presumed to be a unique 19th -century circular service building, it has endured through periods of functional evolution and recent vacancy. Its official designation as a protected monument, coupled with its architectural rarity in Belgium, underscores its profound historical and cultural significance.

The ongoing efforts by Stichting Kempens Landschap, supported by public funds

from the municipality of Malle and the province of Antwerp, are not merely about the physical restoration of a dilapidated structure. Instead, they represent a thoughtful re-imagining of the RondBouw's role within the broader community. By transforming its interior into a versatile open space and actively seeking a public-oriented, economically sustainable new purpose, the RondBouw is poised to become a vibrant and accessible landmark. This revitalization will enrich both the intricate historical narrative of Kasteel van Westmalle and the cultural life of the Malle community. The journey of the RondBouw thus embodies the dynamic interplay between preserving the past and forging a relevant, sustainable future for cherished heritage assets.

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