



Staff Report
City of Richmond, Virginia



Commission of Architectural Review

2. COA-111537-2022	Final Review	Meeting Date: 5/24/2022
Applicant/Petitioner	David Gordon - VUU	
Project Description	Retain four internally illuminated wall signs on the Belgian Building Tower.	
Project Location		
Address: 1500 N. Lombardy		
Historic District: Belgian Building		
High-Level Details: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The applicant requests permission to retain one internally illuminated sign on each of the four faces of the bell tower of the Belgian Building. Each sign is approximately 300 square feet and mounted to the bell tower louvers structure. This application is the result of an enforcement action, as the applicant has already installed the signs without received a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA). 		
Staff Recommendation	Denial of the request for the following reasons: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The proposed signage does not meet the guidelines for scale, size, and illumination; and The sign is installed in a way that damages and obscures a character defining feature of the building. 	
Staff Contact	Alyson Oliver, alyson.oliver@rva.gov , 804-646-3709	
Previous Reviews	<p>October 2019 - VUU applied to CAR for a COA to install internally illuminated signs on the louvered portion of the Belgian Building tower.</p> <p>November 2019 - The applicant withdrew the request prior to the November CAR meeting.</p> <p>January 2020 - A Stop Work Order was issued because the signs were installed without the proper permits. A Notice of Violation was issued by CAR and Zoning for installation of the signs without a COA and for the size of the signage.</p> <p>February 2020 - VUU applied to CAR for a COA to keep the signs, as installed. At the February 2020 meeting, CAR denied the COA</p>	

	(6-0) because the sign did not meet the guidelines established for signage.
Building Details	<p>The Belgian Building, originally a pavilion designed by Henry Van de Velde in the International style for Belgium's entry into the 1939 New York World's Fair, is an individual City and Old Historic District and is individually listed on the State (1969) and National Registers (1970).</p> <p>The pavilion was originally designed and built in Belgium, and then shipped to the New York World's Fair in four modular pieces. The building was intended to be returned to Belgium following the Fair, but when the time the Fair closed in 1940, Belgium was an occupied country. The Belgian government in exile decided to donate the pavilion and carillon to an American institution. After a competitive process, Virginia Union University was selected to receive the building. The approximately 165-foot tower originally held bells, which were later donated to President Herbert Hoover for his Stanford University library.</p> <p>Representative of the International Style, the complex has minimal ornamentation and colors, uses modular forms and flat surfaces, and has an emphasis on volumes. The belfry section of the prominent tower is defined by a distinctive use of louvers.</p>

Staff Analysis

Guideline Reference	Reference Text	Analysis
Standards for Signage, pg. 73	<i>Designs for signs in City Old and Historic Districts should reflect the pedestrian scale of the District. Signs within a District should be modest in size and addressed to pedestrians and slower vehicular traffic. Large signs designed with heavy, high speed vehicular traffic in mind are not appropriate. Please note: sign size restrictions are imposed by the Zoning Ordinance, and cannot be modified by the Commission.</i>	<p>The four wall signs do not meet the Commission's standards for signage. The signs are not modest in size nor are they designed to address pedestrians, but rather drivers on the surrounding streets and highway.</p> <p>Staff also notes that the Zoning Division denied the sign application because it exceeds the permitted sign area in an institutional zoning district. In general, signs with this total area are not permitted by the city's zoning ordinance.</p>
Flat Wall Signs, pg. 74	<i>Flat wall signs are wooden or metal sign panels applied directly to a building façade when a storefront cornice is not present. Generally, these signs are intended to be viewed from a moderate distance. Flat wall signs should be designed to enhance the façade by blending with the architectural features of the building. They should not be merely applied to the surface of the building, nor should they cover or obscure important architectural elements.</i>	<p>The signs do not meet the Guidelines for flat wall signs. Most notably, the installed signs obscure important architectural elements of the building, namely the louvered belfry. The signs are applied directly to a character-defining feature of the building and greatly detract from the overall architectural character of the building.</p> <p>Additional information provided with this submission indicates that the louvers have been cut to accommodate the installation of the signs, damaging this historic feature (see Figure 5).</p>

General Signage Guidelines, pg. 75	<i>7. Signs should not be internally illuminated</i>	The applicant seeks approval for internally illuminated signs. Internally illuminated signs are not permitted under the general signage Guidelines.
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Figures



Figure 1. Belgian Building complex, November 2019.



Figure 2. Belgian Building belfry, November 2019.



Figure 1. Belgian Building complex, current conditions.



Figure 2. Belgian Building belfry, current conditions.



Figure 5. Sign connection to the bell tower, as shown from the interior.