



Antwerp is the new Paris

Forget Paris. Give Milan a break. Antwerp is confirming its status as Europe's capital of cool

Stéphanie Duval

When you look at Antwerp closely – filtering out the tourist attractions and construction sites – you'll probably

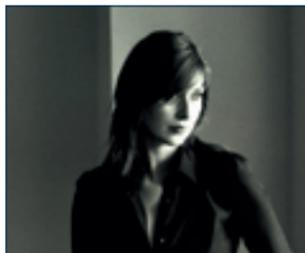
reach the same conclusion we did. Antwerp really is the new Paris. This is not just a slogan that sounds good (though we think it does). There's more to it than that. When

people think of Paris, they think of romance and history, culture and good eating, and probably also of fashion. Antwerp has all that, and more.

The city has long been labelled the fashion capital of Belgium, but we reckon you could just as easily call it the fashion capital of Europe. Of course Paris and Milan have a

much longer history when it comes to prestigious houses of fashion – a rich heritage that can't be ignored.

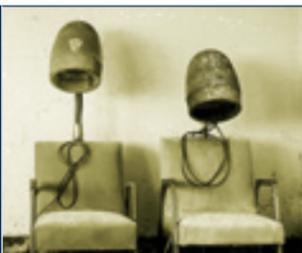
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Arts

A new exhibition in Antwerp's Fashion Museum profiles the designer Veronique Branquinho. Stéphanie Duval looks at an edgy talent whose influences range from *Twin Peaks* to fairy tales.

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Living

Henk van Rensbergen spends his weekends photographing abandoned buildings. Monique Philips finds out about the fascination of ruins.

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Interview

Lene Kemps edits the magazine *Feeling*. Her readers are intelligent 30-something women who know what they want, she tells Steven Tate.

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IMF criticises Belgium over cost of ageing

Government "far from prepared," says report

Alan Hope

Belgium is "far from prepared" to meet the challenges of the rising costs of an ageing population, according to a report for the IMF prepared by the head of its regional studies division, the Fleming Luc Everaert.

In Europe in general, one in four of the population by 2050 will be over 65, compared to one in six at present. In Belgium the population is expected to rise by 5% by mid-century, but the number of over-65s will grow by 63%. Meanwhile, the old age dependency ratio – the number

of workers required to support one retired person – will grow from one worker for three retired people to one-to-one.

At the same time, while technological advances produce an increase in demand for health care, they do little, the IMF says, to reduce costs. By 2050 again, it estimates, "every worker will need to contribute an extra €8,000 per year (in 2008 prices) to the social security system" to pay for increased demand.

The problem Belgium faces, the Everaert report says, is a result of its present-day

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Abandoned

An urban explorer captures on film the beauty of the derelict

Photos: Henk van Rensbergen



In limbo: one of Henk van Rensbergen's most-recognised photographs is this one of Castle Mesen in Lede, which is beyond repair but which the town's municipality is reluctant to demolish

Monique Philips

“Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints” is the motto of the Sierra Club, a leading environmental organisation. They're talking about nature, but there is another group that applies this sentiment to an altogether different type of

habitat in Flanders – abandoned spaces.

Flanders is full of churches, factories and former state-owned institutions that have been empty for years and offer unending possibilities for intrepid explorers (who are sometimes illegal or, at the very least, unwelcome). One

Flemish man, though, has made it his mission to find and record this vast realm.

Henk van Rensbergen pinpoints the start of his fascination at age 10. He and a friend spotted a derelict villa on top of a dune in Oostduinkerke on the Flemish coast. “I remember it so vividly,” he says.

“The interior was mouldy, but intact. There were alarm clocks, and I found a dusty packet of Superlevure [yeast]. We tiptoed in – and ran out screaming when we encountered other kids, playing in there, too.”

But messing around with his pals in abandoned sites isn't what

interests van Rensbergen. In fact, rather than grabbing onto an equally scared buddy, he prefers to go alone. “When you take somebody along, you spend more time negotiating about where to go next than effectively exploring,” says the photographer and pilot. “And by going alone and often being under



Van Rensbergen followed the 2002 closure and ensuing deterioration of the century-old Anderlues coke factory in Hainaut province

some pressure, I understand a building better and can take those particular pictures that somehow reflect the site's essence."

Van Rensbergen maintains an abandoned places website that gets 600 hits a day. He's a scholar and a hero to urban explorers across the world. It's no coincidence that the preface of his photo book, *Abandoned Places*, which he published last year, is penned by Dixie Dansercoer, notorious Pole explorer and close friend. It's the call of the unknown that puts a spell on them both.

With a lopsided smile, van Rensbergen admits that his urge to enter abandoned places is uncontrollable. "I get so curious about what it will look like inside. I simply have to go in. Immediately. But on holiday, for instance, I can't leave my wife and kids waiting in the car for hours. Even so, it hurts to leave a place unexplored."

Moreover, for the best results, he needs to go back more than once. He explains, for instance, his first set of photos of the gigantic former coal wash complex Triage-Lavoire de Binches, an Escher-like labyrinth of stairs and corridors. They inexplicably all just looked like snapshots, however hard he tried. "It wasn't until after several visits, during which I just sat, watched and listened, that the building seemed to come alive and allowed me in," the 39-year-old explains. "That's when I saw its calmer elements and could keep the chaos in check: that one staircase, that one ladder. It's only after looking at a place from different angles that you discover its possibilities. You need that insight before you can show its soul: frightening, charming, mysterious or whatever."

Though this solitude is one of the positives of going in alone, a recent accident has rendered van Rensbergen more careful. "I dislocated my knee, which could have happened coming out of the bath, as well, but it didn't. And so I found myself alone in an empty factory. It does make you think about falling into a pit, unable to reach your mobile."



Van Rensbergen captures the essence of abandoned places all over the world: a former asylum in the United States

The spots

Driving through Flanders, you can easily spot empty lots. But extensive complexes attract van Rensbergen more than a singular slum, as do recently vacated dwellings more than tagged and vandalised ruins. "But everything has its charm."

Well, almost everything. The former Lemaire Institute for TB patients on the Tombeek hill in Overijse is more haunted than charming. Even in broad daylight, the surrounding pine trees seal you off effectively from the rest of the world. Urban explorers Europe-wide know about the place and speak about it with some unease. When van Rensbergen ventured there a couple of times at night to

experiment with full moon or flash exposures, the unease crept up on him, too. "My back felt terribly exposed."

But outdoor spaces aren't nearly as frightening to this journalist (and fellow urban explorer) as interiors. The extensive cellars of Tour and Taxis in Brussels, which van Rensbergen at one point crossed in pitch dark, are the scariest empty spaces to me. And no way would I have entered the cellars of the Sint-Elisabeth clinic in Ukkel, however photogenic the slabs in the morgue are rumoured to be.

The shots

The photo of Castle Mesen is a van Rensbergen classic. Where now the park surrounding

this former school for the French-speaking elite in East Flanders is open to the public, 15 years ago it was still very much an enchanted garden. "I walked along the high enclosing wall on a Sunday morning, unable to scale it, and finally just rang the bell of an adjoining house. Eventually, the lady who owned the house reluctantly agreed: 'Okay, you can climb over my garden wall. It was just awesome.'"

For the lucky few who've slipped over garden walls, Castle Mesen is a wonder to behold. "There it was," remembers van Rensbergen. "Like a huge, wrecked ship washed up on a beach." The top of one of its broad staircases was totally overgrown with big ferns.

It would be impossible to remake that same picture now, as Castle Mesen has been degraded by its many visitors – wedding photographers and ghost hunters alike. The castle was protected by law in 1979, but inaccuracies in legal procedures finally left it defenceless. Recently, the square-built complex was declared beyond repair. In the church, the floor is covered by thick layers of pigeon poo. The stained-glass windows remain intact, but its mansard roof is barely hanging on.

The thieves

To keep antique-robbers away, van Rensbergen has decided to only show certain buildings on his website after they've been demolished. But he doesn't mind other people exploring, especially as he considers himself to be partly responsible by putting his discove-

ries on the internet. He believes strongly in that motto that urban explorers share with the Sierra Club. "When you take some object from a wall or a room, you're taking away someone else's chance of seeing it in its original state. Just leave it as it is."

To him the aesthetics of abandoned spaces have become much more appreciated over the last few years. Some viewers of his work are touched by nostalgia while others are horrified by the destruction. Van Rensbergen doesn't see the decline as a nightmare – even when he, as a pilot, climbed into the charred remains of an airplane parked next to the airfield on Curaçao.

"It didn't shock me; I was enchanted by its beauty and peacefulness," he says. "That plane had flown for hours and hours, come hail or high water, through the heat and cold, and finally found its resting place. Planes are usually cut up or, as in this case, used for fire drills. But there it still is, standing tall, wings and engines proud, chin up, watching other planes land. Even gutted, it still serves some purpose."

In fact, van Rensbergen did live through the disastrous demise of his former employer, the Belgian airline Sabena, in 2001. Suddenly, on a Friday evening, its doors were literally sealed off. Now we know why calendars in busted factories remain stuck on a particular day.

Next week: why so many abandoned places in Belgium?

Online
www.abandoned-places.com



Henk van Rensbergen in another tight spot

The website

Henk van Rensbergen's English website www.abandoned-places.com is about 10 years old but hasn't lost any of its attraction to its daily 600 mainly non-Flemish visitors. Click on any of the 55 items on the photo wheels and you'll be able to appreciate his magnificent shots within their various contexts, read the accompanying texts and follow in his footsteps as he extensively explores a site.

Although his is certainly not the only website on the subject, no other photographer manages to capture the tangible atmosphere of each abandoned factory, hospital, or castle so beautifully.