

A taste of Flanders

Foreign leaders tour region

3

A Leg-o up

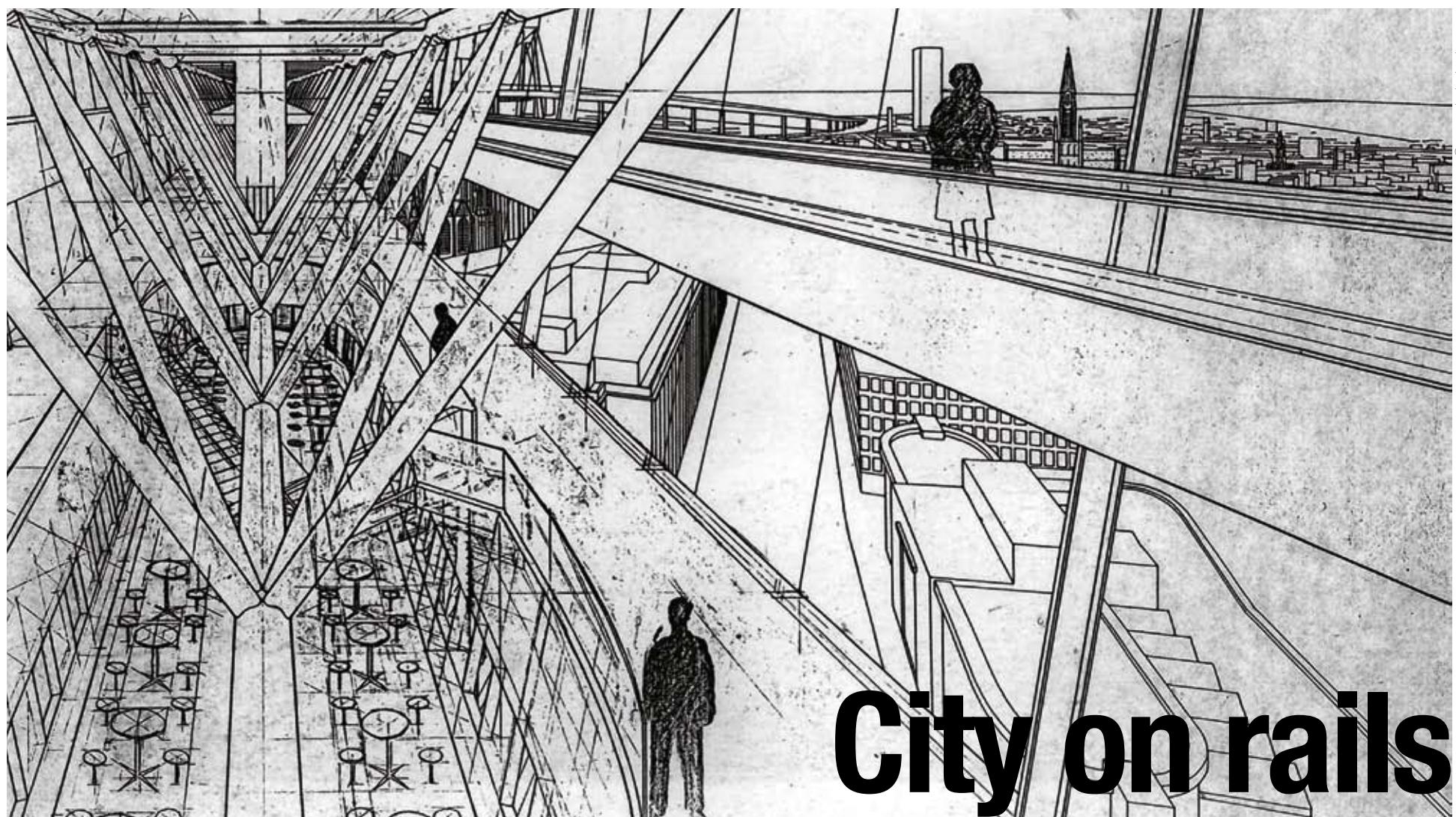
Flanders is home to a Certified
Lego Professional

10

A lot of candles

The National Orchestra of Belgium
turns 75

11



City on rails

Brussels North-South line celebrates its 60th anniversary

NICOLAS DE MOY

You're nothing these days without a festival, and several Brussels organisation are launching one to commemorate the 60th birthday of the railway line that connects the North and South Stations of Brussels. Next year marks 60 years, but the festival starts now – and meanders into 2013.

The gigantic engineering achievement that is the north-south line consists of six tracks of saturated railway traffic under a 2.8 kilometre-long tunnel and has always divided public opinion,

just as it divides the city through its very heart. For two full years, several events and debates will take place alongside the famous rail line.

Few people are aware that the first-ever railway line on the European continent was on Flemish soil. It opened in 1835 and linked Brussels to Mechelen. At that time, Brussels and urban developer King Leopold II, owner of the Belgian Congo, had big plans for the young capital of this new nation.

Around 1856, Leopold and the city of Brussels began discussing

the idea of connecting the two main stations, North and South, through the centre of town, thus improving some squalid neighbourhoods, bringing more commercial activity to the centre and, most importantly, unifying the capital city. But just a couple of years later, the plan was abandoned due to the enormous costs and expropriation challenges. Instead, they decided to connect north and south stations by the west of the city alongside the canal, which was done in 1871.

 ➤ *continued on page 5*

Meet the robot tractor at Machinery Days

Visitors to the International Agricultural Machinery Days in Oudenaarde, East Flanders, later this month – among them Flemish minister-president Kris Peeters and environment minister Joke Schauvliege, have a surprise in store: A tractor that drives itself.

The robot tractor (pictured) is the work of the Flanders Mechatronics Technology Centre and the Mechatronics, Biostatistics and Sensors department of the Catholic University of Leuven. Their job was to develop a sensor system that could perform the operations carried out by an experienced tractor driver: constantly evaluating the position of the tractor, the condition of the terrain and the dimensions of the field, and then be able to judge the correct direction and speed needed. To do that, the tractor, constructed by the Italian machinery manufacturer New Holland, is fitted with sensors that measure the soil conditions, and even keep track of the slippage of the wheels in wet or muddy conditions.

"By allowing agricultural machines to ride around autonomously, the ever-increasing operating costs can be reduced," said



© LeCoPro

Vincent Theunynck of New Holland. "On top of that, there is no longer any need to adjust the driving mechanisms in changing conditions, thanks to the robot's own learning behaviour."

The robot tractor can be seen in action in a video here: www.lecopro.org/tractor.wmv. Agricultural Machinery Days is on 24-25 September.

 ➤ www.werktuigendagen.be

BHV will be split

Negotiations to form a federal government clear major hurdle

ALAN HOPE

The international press could agree on one thing last week: The agreement reached by the eight parties negotiating the formation of a new federal government in Belgium was "historic".

For an event that had been more than a year in the preparation, the agreement on the first major stumbling block in negotiations seemed to come out of the blue. A day before, the king had been requested to return from his holiday in the south of France. *Formateur*

Elio Di Rupo had reportedly sent the other party chairmen home on Tuesday night with the warning that the following day's session would be the last. If no common ground could be found, the *formateur* was ready to throw in the towel.

In the end, the agreement covers one of the dossiers that proved impossible to resolve over the last year. The electoral district of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde, known as BHV, will be split.

 ➤ *continued on page 3*



ALAN HOPE

Ghislain Londers

The senior judge at the Cassation Court, the highest court in the country, announced his resignation last week. Ghislain Londers was educated at the Catholic University of Leuven and took up the position as president of the Cassation Court in 2007 after a 20-year career as a magistrate. Even such an elevated position rarely brings any public fame, but that changed for Londers when, in December 2008, he wrote a letter to Herman Van Rompuy, then speaker of the federal parliament, alleging "unacceptable government contacts" in a case dealing with the rights of shareholders of Fortis bank. The bank was then in the process of being sold by the federal government to BNP Paribas of France.

The government, Londers alleged, had attempted to influence the opinions of the four judges sitting in the case. The letter, an unprecedented breach of protocol, led to the resignation of federal justice minister Jo Vandeurzen (now a minister in the Flemish government) and later to that of prime minister Yves Leterme. Van Rompuy stepped in as caretaker prime minister and, in July of 2009, Leterme

became foreign affairs minister, returning to the PM's office when Van Rompuy became president of the European Council in November that year.

The letter earned Londers an investigation by the prosecutor-general for possible breach of professional confidentiality. That investigation is still running, and federal justice minister Stefaan De Clerck, responding to Londers' resignation, was careful to point out last week that he did not consider the announcement to be connected in any way to the case.

Meanwhile the four judges who were sitting in the so-called Fortisgate case last week heard the verdict in their trial for breach of confidentiality and forgery of official documents (see story, p7).

With the departure of Londers, the justice system loses one of its most prominent advocates for reform to tackle the chronic backlog of cases, which has seen many charges dropped for lack of time or for passing the statute of limitations and serious cases normally destined for jury trial dealt with instead by lower courts.

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FLANDERS TODAY
SEPTEMBER 21, 2011

News in brief

Cycling has never been so popular in Flanders, according to a study by the Catholic University of Leuven, with 1.1 million people in the region regularly cycling on the roads, and another 150,000 taking part in spinning exercises in gyms.

Federal interior minister Annemie Turtelboom has promised new resources for the city of Ostend to tackle the problem of "transit illegals" – illegal immigrants who pass through the port on their way to the United Kingdom. A new intervention team will carry out regular patrols in the station area in September, with back-up support from police forces in Bruges and Ghent. Illegal immigrants will be picked up and held in detention before being repatriated.

Flemish minister-president Kris Peeters last week announced a grant of €50,000 for research aimed at tackling the problem of **in-breeding of dogs**. Pedigree dogs are often bred for specific physical characteristics, a practice that can lead to health problems in the animals. The measure aims to secure the future of dog breeding, Peeters said, without losing sight of the animals' welfare.

Physical exercise in the open air in cities can pose health problems, according to Flemish sports physician Chris Goossens. City air, he claimed, contains 70 times the safe limit of lead, 75 times too much mercury and 30 times too much cadmium. "What is the point of a smoking ban

if we're breathing in stuff that's ten times more dangerous?" he asked. However, he pointed out that exercising in the open air is healthier than not exercising at all, though he advised switching to indoor exercise. Goossens was a committed cyclist and jogger for 20 years, he said, before problems with his nervous system forced him to give it up. Earlier this year, researchers from the university of Hasselt published an article in *The Lancet* arguing that air pollution was a more hazardous trigger for heart attacks than drugs, alcohol and high blood pressure.

A civil action for damages by 39 **victims of sexual abuse** by clergy against the Holy See and the bishops of Belgium was last week postponed by a Ghent judge after a request by the defendants for the evidence to be heard by three judges. The victims are seeking provisional damages of €10,000 each.

Flemish Opera has for the first time ever issued an **age restriction on audiences** for the new production of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*. Visitors under the age of 16 will not be admitted because of scenes of extreme violence and explicit sex, the opera said. The production, conducted by Yannis Pouspourikas and directed by Calixto Bieito, premières in Antwerp on 21 September.

Companies that **buy advertising space** in newspapers and magazines have a 7-27% greater

chance of obtaining additional editorial coverage in the month following the ad, according to a doctoral thesis by researcher Dries De Smet of the Catholic University of Leuven. The exact mechanism, which is stronger in magazines than newspapers, is not clear, De Smet said, but there is no evidence that businesses exercise any pressure on newsdesks.

A man suspected of four rapes and several attempts in the Antwerp area since 2008 was last week arrested after a speeding incident in Nijlen, Antwerp province. The man, who is 47 and lives in Boom, has no police or criminal record.

The Royal Museum of Central Africain Tervuren has removed the **horns from stuffed rhinoceroses** on display in its permanent collection as a precaution against thieves. Rhino horns, which are prized by Chinese medicine, were recently stolen from the Natural History museum in Brussels and a zoological institute in Liège.

Greek authorities have agreed to return a painting by the Old Master Pieter Paul Rubens stolen from the **Fine Arts Museum in Ghent** 10 years ago and recovered by Greek police in a sting operation earlier this month. The Greek culture ministry said it had carried out the necessary investigations to identify the work, which will now be returned to Ghent as soon as possible. Two men, a 65-year-old art dealer and a 40-year-old TV presenter, were arrested trying to sell the work for €1 million.

OFFSIDE

Hallowed hamster

When you think of an endangered species, the image that springs to mind probably isn't one of a fluffy animal running around in an exercise wheel. But the humble hamster is indeed facing extinction in Flanders, according to the conservation organisation Natuurpunt.

Despite their best investigative efforts, Natuurpunt, with the help of members of the public, was able to find hamsters living in the wild in only two places in Flanders last year: Bertem in Flemish Brabant and the Widooye-Heers area of Limburg province. Everywhere else, the tiny rodent is nowhere to be found.

The problem is not restricted to Flanders. Hamsters are still common in Eastern Europe, but in the west are everywhere threatened with extinction. The reason, according to Natuurpunt, is the intensification of agriculture and, in particular, the disappearance of hedgerows. "Harvesting is done too often, in too short a time and at a period that's too early," Natuurpunt says. Pesticides in agriculture also play a negative role. Surprisingly, hamsters as pets have not been with us long. The most common breed is the Golden Hamster (*Mesocricetus auratus*), which is descended from wild hamsters caught in Syria. But the breed was only successfully bred and domesticated in 1930, about a century after first being described by scientists. On the face of it, the little things don't seem like strong candidates for surviving in the wild. Colour-blind, near-sighted and a solitary animal. On the other hand,



it has excellent hearing, communicates at frequencies in the ultrasound range and has a terrific sense of smell for detecting food, predators and mates. Until now, the hamster has benefited from the protection of a management agreement hammered out between agriculture organisations and the Flemish government, under which farmers can receive extra subsidies for measures that help conserve numbers. But that agreement runs out at the end of this year. Natuurpunt is calling on environment minister Joke Schauvliege to take steps to protect the hamster. According to the Flemish Land Agency, a proposed new agreement has been drawn up and is awaiting the approval of the EU Commission.

FLANDERS TODAY

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Lack of Flemish voters in the capital

→ *continued from page 1*

Flemish Brabant is alone among the provinces of Belgium in not being a single electoral district. One part of the province, around Leuven, is a single district; the rest, 35 Flemish municipalities, is tacked onto the 19 communes of Brussels. Both sets of parties stand in elections there, and the growing number of French-speaking voters in the municipalities around Brussels have become an important constituency for French-speaking parties, in particular the hard-line FDF of Olivier Maingain. The constitutional court has already declared the situation unconstitutional, so that even before the elections of June 2010, there was serious concern that the election itself was invalid. However, no agreement could be found to split the district.

The stakes for Flanders

- For Flanders, the ability to vote in a Flemish province for French-speaking parties is a serious anomaly: There is no corresponding right for any Fleming living in Wallonia, for example. The situation contributes to the further

"Frenchification" of the periphery of Brussels.

- The constituency of French-speaking voters now living in Flemish municipalities has become too important for French-speaking parties to ignore. For years there have even been calls for the six municipalities with facilities (which allow residents to obtain official documents in French, for example) to be included in a new Greater Brussels, which would then cut through Flanders to form a sort of Brussels-Walloon corridor.
- Flemings in Brussels, meanwhile, have other concerns. At present there are only two Flemish members of the federal parliament representing Brussels. They owe their seats to the votes cast for their party lists in Halle-Vilvoorde, because there are not enough Flemish voters in the capital. If Flemish parties were to present lists for Brussels alone, none would achieve the minimum level of votes needed to take a seat.

The agreement

The agreement reached last week places the Halle-Vilvoorde municipalities back into the Flemish Brabant electoral district. The exception is the six facility municipalities: Kraainem, Wezembeek-Oppem, Linkebeek, Sint-Genesius-Rode, Drogenbos and Wemmel, where the option will exist to vote for Brussels lists. There is also a new procedure for dealing with cases like that of the three mayors in Linkebeek, Wezembeek-Oppem and Kraainem, whose breach of the language laws led to the Flemish



The press await the arrival of politicians after a meeting of the negotiating parties in Brussels last Wednesday, 14 September

government refusing to recognise their appointments; such disputes will now be dealt with by a bilingual Chamber of the Council of State.

The agreement also brings about the end of the 40 senators currently directly elected to the Senate. The number of community senators goes up from 21 to 50, 29 from the Flemish parliament, 20 from the French community and one from the German community, while senators co-opted by the parties stay at 10. The three senators *ex officio* – the offspring of the monarch – vanish completely.

What Flemish politicians think

The negotiators collectively released a statement describing "an important breakthrough obtained at a reasonable price" but stressed that "the work is far from being over".

Flemish minister-president Kris

Peeters said the agreement was "an important and essential first step in reaching a global agreement. The borders of Flanders remain intact."

For former prime minister Jean-Luc Dehaene, "the agreement was honourable and balanced".

Bart De Wever, president of the N-VA, which dropped out of negotiations, said that his party "had expected a lot worse. It's not a good agreement, but it's not a nightmare either".

In the meantime, the party negotiators started this week on the rest of the dossiers still on the table, some of them not easier to deal with than BHV: new financing rules governing how much the regions receive, the composition of a coalition and a devolution of powers from the federal to the regional level. BHV was a first step, but there is still much work to do before a new government can be formed.♦

THE WEEK IN FIGURES



8,034

family doctors in Flanders in 2010, up from 7,912 in 2009, according to figures from the federal health ministry. Among doctors aged 25 and 29, 70% are women

€1,500

in prize money to Annick Vastrade, whose garden in the Brussels' municipality of Ukkel was voted the prettiest in Belgium in a competition sponsored by power-tool manufacturer Bosch

94.5%

of deaths in Flanders every year are by natural causes. Remaining deaths are led by suicide, road accidents and falls

€1,100

fine to be paid by a Leuven man who was caught using public transport without a ticket 69 times in 2009 and 2010. On four separate occasions, he was caught twice in one day

61

days of rain between 1 June and 1 September, something that occurs about once in a century, according to the Royal Meteorological Institute. An average year in Belgium sees 44 days of rain. The record of 68 dates back to 1860

New campaign to break stigma around dementia

Flemish minister for well-being, health and family Jo Vandeurzen (CD&V) presented a plan last weekend, shortly before World Dementia Day on 21 September, "to break the stigma that is associated with dementia".

There are at present some 100,000 people in Flanders who suffer from the disease that affects mostly the elderly and causes a loss of cognitive ability – a number that "will double in the next 35 years," the minister's

cabinet said, citing the simple fact that the population is aging. A different approach is needed because "the presence of dementia in our society will reach a level at which it will affect each and every one of us".

The campaign will focus on raising awareness about the disease. "We need to have a more nuanced approach to dementia," minister Vandeurzen said.

"We need to get rid of the stigma."

He also plans to invest in so-called

→ www.dementie.be

Foreign decision makers visit Flanders

Flemish minister-president Kris Peeters on Monday met with decision makers from Spain and Poland at nanotechnology company IMEC as part of a five-day programme designed to "contribute to a better understanding" of the region.

IMEC, a leader in the research of nano-applications in sectors such as health care, "smart electronics", renewable energy and transport, gave the visitors a tour of its facilities in Leuven, including their "clean room", a dust-free laboratory for the development of computer chips. It then led them to NERF, which delves into the mysteries of the brain in order to develop cures for diseases such as Alzheimers.

Peeters also presented visitors with the Flemish Region's new industrial policy, dubbed Factory of the Future. The policy, approved last May, is meant to help Flemish industry to remain competitive in the future within the rapidly changing global business environment.



Flemish minister-president Kris Peeters introduces visiting foreign leaders to the research being done at IMEC and Craftmanship, which is part of an initiative launched by Peeters' office last year called the Flanders International Visitors Programme. Two more programmes are scheduled to take place later this year: one in October about Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development and one in December about Flanders' Care, the government's agency for innovation in health care.♦

FIFTH COLUMN

ANJA OTTE

Good bye, Leterme

The first memory many journalists have of Yves Leterme is that of a number-crunching MP, around 2000. The Verhofstadt government, the first without Christian-democrats in decades, was riding high, and CD&V seemed doomed. How in the world was this man, solid but boring, going to change all that?

Well, he did. As people became weary of Verhofstadt's colourful bunch, they took to Leterme's straightforwardness. He may not have had a great knowledge of viniculture or a Tuscan villa, but the public embraced him as an ordinary man, with a love for goats, his son's amateur cycling career and – of course – numbers. In 2004, CD&V was back and 'the bookkeeper' became Flemish minister-president.

By then, journalists got to know a more ruthless Leterme, as he made a habit of texting them very early in the morning to point out "factual inaccuracies" in their articles. Leterme simply cannot stand errors in print, whether they are about his budget or the number of times Eddy Merckx has won some bike race.

Leterme definitely got his own numbers right when he forged a cartel between his own party and the N-VA, then hanging on for dear life. Together, they were strong enough to break the liberal-socialist majority and bring the old Christian-democrats back to power. The cartel changed the French speakers' perception of the man, who was raised perfectly bilingual: From then on, they considered him a radical, "a dangerous man", in the words of vice-prime minister Laurette Onkelinx.

Leterme's victory in 2007 should have been the start of a new era. Instead, his 800,000 votes (or rather 796,521, sorry Yves!) became a millstone around his neck. As the French speakers refused a deal on language matters, the fire that Leterme had breathed into life slowly consumed him. Maybe, some people said, Leterme was never made for the post of prime minister.

However, during the bank crisis, Leterme excelled. Ironically, the same crisis also led to his resignation. He returned as prime minister in 2009, only to be faced with BHV again. In the 2010 election, he was defeated by N-VA, the "cuckoo's young" he raised. As a caretaker prime minister since then, he did more than count the days. He gained everyone's respect by keeping Belgium out of the international financial storm. This was the number cruncher at his best again.

So now he is off to a job at the OECD. May there be plenty of numbers involved!



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putting people first

City on rails

The multi-disciplinary Jonction festival continues into 2013

» *continued from page 1*

Barely 20 years later, due to an exponential growth in traffic, it became clear that another connection was needed. The Belgian state and the city of Brussels collaborated on the works that began 1903. In the name of urban regeneration and the promise of a better life for the working class, entire mediaeval neighbourhoods were demolished.

Enthusiasm and disillusion

As with the covering of the river Zenne – which used to meander through the old parts of the city – in the name of public health, modernisation applied to poor areas of the city caused displacement. From 1903 until the First World War, around 10,000 *Brusselaars* were displaced.

Stirrings of activism had little effect, and, in the 1920s, due to rising costs of raw materials and workforce, 15 more years were added to the completion of the project.

Further, several actions were taken by the city of Brussels against the state in order to abandon the entire project, as it became clear that the costs were escalating and the damage done was irreversible. Only in 1936 did the works start again fully, as it was considered that this building site would help create jobs in a crisis-stricken era. The Second World War put another halt to the works; they started again in 1948.

King Boudewijn finally inaugurated the line – originally meant to be finished by 1914 – on 5 October, 1952.

After all these tragic ups and downs, Brussels and Belgium could finally look towards the future, full of promise and prosperity. Instead of these run-down quarters, a new fresh and modern city would grow, based on the wide boulevards that would allow the increasing flow of cars to bring new life to the city.

It is finally time that Brussels' north-south line becomes the epicentre of everything good and positive that can happen in this city

But because centuries-old neighbourhoods had been razed to the ground, the dense and complex connections from the upper to the lower parts of town had vanished. In their place stood office buildings for the growing middle classes. A whole new lifestyle was created with this engineering achievement: Office workers could now take their train right next to where they worked. The *pendelaars* (commuters) had replaced the *Brusselaars*.

The saturation of the line

Now 1,200 trains a day pass through the 2.8 kilometre-long tunnel through Central Station, making Brussels the first city in Europe that had a train station in its very heart. So useful to both locals and visitors alike, it has become a victim of its own success. It is calculated that by 2020, the need to double the tracks, to create a new tunnel or to create a brand new line will become more than an infrastructural engineer's dream; it will be a necessity.

Hence the need to open a new debate, according to Iwan Strauven, responsible for architectural exhibitions at Bozar – one of the venues of the Jonction festival, staged to celebrate 60 years of the north-south line.

"When you think of the battles of ideas there were for the



The Kapellekerk train station in 1948 Brussels, during works on the north-south rail line, which lasted nearly 50 years

europakruispunt [the round square at the main entrance of Brussels' Central Station] and its mediocre outcome, the necessity of a new pragmatic debate is needed," he says. In some ways, the rail line between north and south and the streets that follow its path have become a thoroughfare of Belgium's old symbolism – a "surrealist patchwork of what Belgium used to be," says Strauven.

From the Zuidstation, or South Station, through the Marollen and onto the Kunstberg and Centraal, passing the cathedral, the National Bank and the defunct mastodon Rijksadministratief Centrum, further on through the botanical garden and finally the Noordstation, North Station, this massive feat of engineering – reconstructing everything in its passage – is all of Brussels at once.

From lively and decrepit working-class districts, to a grand cathedral and peerless monuments, to derelict and bland office buildings. Passing through 15th-century cobblestone streets, a 1950s bowling club, 1,000 year-old city walls, modernist train stations, contemporary skate parks and postmodern Breugelian buildings, this route sums it all up.

Life among the ruins

In the late 1990s, several small cultural organisations like Recyclart and Congres, started new, creative projects along the railways and the disused or barely-used stations of Kapellekerk and Congres. Suddenly, the empty stations and boulevards started attracting a new connected and hip urban crowd with their parties and cultural activities spread throughout the buildings and stations linked to the north-south line.

Several architectural and urban debates took place regarding, for instance, the future of the disused Rijksadministratief Centrum, Ursulines square and the surrounding streets themselves. The urban canyon was barren no more. The new Square international congress centre opened a couple of years ago on the Kunstberg, Central Station opened new shopping galleries and new entrances made it a more accessible and agreeable place. Opportunities are on the rise – what used to be an empty zone is now full of new projects.

Events along Line 0

The line's owner, NMBS Holding, is considering closing the Congres Station and evicting Recyclart. But the citizens of Brussels are always keen to take a stand, and it's in the form of the Jonction festival. The ADT-ATO, the Brussels Territorial Agency, the Brussels Bouwmeester Agency and the Recyclart and Congres art centres are the organisers behind this refreshing initiative.

For the next two years, a vast array of forums, screenings, debates, conferences and exhibitions will take place. Guided walks, artists residencies and fresh architectural visions from invited guests will be on display. For too long, the north-south line has been the symbol of everything that's gone wrong regarding town planning and modern architecture in Brussels. It is finally time that it becomes the epicentre of everything good and positive that can happen in this city. ♦

» www.jonction.be



Living in transition

People across Flanders join forces to diminish their energy consumption

JACQUELINE FLETCHER

It might come as a surprise to hear that over the last quarter, Belgium's GDP growth was the highest in Europe. The British commentator John Lanchester attributes this to the simple fact that Belgium doesn't have a government. And he's far from alone in assuming that politicians worldwide haven't grasped Albert Einstein's basic dictum: "No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it."

So, what to do in the face of fossil-fuel depletion and the potentially devastating consequences? Some think it's time for the average person in the street to take the initiative and find sensible solutions within their own local communities. That is the goal of Transitionenetwork Vlaanderen, or Flemish Transition Network, a steadily growing number of ordinary individuals, families, friends and ad hoc groups who are already rolling up their sleeves and getting on with it.

No more oil

"In principle, the transition takes about 20 years," says Debbie Eraly from Transition Initiative Ghent, referring to the time it takes to adjust to diminishing fossil fuel resources and achieve sustainability with renewable energy. Peak oil, or the point beyond which fossil fuels become too expensive, is not only inevitable, she says, but is happening right now. "We haven't much time left, so the sooner we start to adapt, the better. Then we'll be able to use the remaining oil much more wisely."

This doesn't mean a return to the bad old days. As many local citizens' groups are discovering, dispensing with the derivatives of the petrochemical industry can actually change our lives for the better and release all kinds of hidden human potential, renewed connections and values we've allowed to lie fallow for decades.

There are more than 50 transition initiatives in Brussels and Flanders, an impressive figure

out of the nearly 400 worldwide. And the movement is growing rapidly. "This gives me hope for the future," one Flemish woman exclaims, with a sigh of relief. Another young woman, digging with rubber gloves in a community garden, declared: "The great thing about the Transition Initiative is that it is for everyone. It's a grass-roots movement, and you can actually do something."

Local, local, local

The international Transition Town Network gives a whole new twist to the slogan "power to the people". It all began five years ago when ecological designer Rob Hopkins was teaching a sustainability course in a technical college in Ireland. His students designed a model for the transition from oil dependency to sustainable living, and when Hopkins returned to Totnes, his home town in south-west England, he started experimenting with the idea.

The process of re-localising the economy can start informally with, say, film screenings, recycle markets, choirs, break dancing or whatever best suits the community. The next step would be to design a so-called "energy descent plan" for education, food, transport, etc. The aim of the plan is to create local businesses and employment, breweries and bakeries, organic farms and community orchards, cycle routes, public transport and renewable energy sources.

Some initiatives even have a local currency, keeping money circulating within the community and stimulating the local economy. Hopkins will be in Brussels next week to talk about these issues and how they can be applied to Brussels and Flanders.

Some Flemish people join the movement for a particular reason, such as being tired of processed food, for example, that has travelled thousands of kilometres. Wouter Smets from Antwerp started sowing pumpkin seeds along the bicycle path that circles the centre of the



Often citizens can get permission to turn unused public spaces into gardens, a popular transition initiative

city. There's often unused spaces in urban environments where fruit and vegetables can be grown. "I dream of picking tomatoes on the Astridplein," he says.

Come on, neighbour

According to participants, transition initiatives engender a community spirit, empathy and a common purpose. They see it as the ideology of a post-fossil fuel age; but convincing neighbours to participate isn't always easy. In rural areas like the Flemish Ardennes, small groups of people organise nature walks, cycle trips or just gatherings to raise awareness and stimulate activities. There are transition trainings and manuals for guidance, courses in permaculture and sustainable economics and, of course, support and advice through the network's website.

And it doesn't all have to be a doom-and-gloom attitude. Flemish performance troupe Fou de Coudre is only one of many festive

initiatives that put zest into the movement, while encouraging participants to discover their skills and imagine their futures.

The Transition Network is seen by many citizens as the most hopeful and inspiring development in decades. Local governments are welcome to climb onboard and many have lent support to initiatives. But Hopkins stresses the importance of community involvement and motivation. "Your local authority's role will be to support, not to drive, your Transition Initiative."♦

Ron Hopkins:

Transition Cities and Towns

29 September, 20.00
IHECS, Stoofstraat 58-60
Brussels

► www.transitie.be

In peacetime • Flanders takes its time to reflect on the notion of peace

Christmas may be for many the most peaceful time of year, but in Flanders, the last week of September is a worthy contender. It is then that governments and social organisations organise the Vlaamse Vredesweek, or Flemish Week of Peace.

Exhibitions, documentaries, debates, markets and other get-togethers across the region this year focus on the global arm's trade. There will be mysterious "street actions" in Hasselt and Leuven, a screening of the Polish film *Katyn* in Bruges and a debate on "the sense or nonsense of holding elections in Congo" in Brussels, among many other events. There's also a small web shop with books and games. All under the explosive slogan of "Don't shoot development to bits!"

This year marks the 22nd edition of the week of peace, which aims to "draw the attention of the public to the theme of peace" by reaching out to politicians, schools and the general public alike. The event has already been partly responsible for such lasting effects as the Belgian law against land mines and the foundation of the Flemish Institute for Peace.♦

Vlaamse Vredesweek

21 September to 2 October

Across Flanders

► www.vredesweek.be

PHILIP EBELS



World's biggest lock gets go-ahead

The Port of Antwerp is set to build the world's biggest lock, after an agreement was reached last week to finance the project. The lock will link the existing Deurganck dock with the other docks on the left bank of the Scheldt, which at present have only one nautical link with the rest of the port area. The budget for the project is €340 million, of which just under half will be paid by the European Investment Bank. KBC will extend a credit line of €81 million, while the Port of Antwerp and the Flemish government make up the rest.

According to Flemish minister for public works, Hilde Crevits, "the construction of the Deurganckdok lock is important for the maritime future of the Antwerp port area. Access to our ports is crucial for Flanders."

The ports, says Crevits, are the most important driving forces of the region's economy, and within that the locks play a critical role. "The further extension of the port infrastructure and the improvement of access are essential to our being able to admit large ships without delay."

The figures for the construction are impressive: The new dock will be built on the model of the existing Berendrecht dock, which is currently the largest in the world. It will be 500 metres long and 68 metres wide. That's as long as the Meir shopping street in Antwerp's city centre, or the equivalent of 28 De Lijn buses parked nose to tail. The width will be equivalent to a 19-lane motorway.

Those dimensions are the same as the Berendrecht dock, but the new dock is deeper: 17.8 metres compared to 13.58 metres. The concrete required for the new dock is enough to build a 35-storey building with a footprint the size of a football pitch, and the steel needed is enough for three Eiffel towers.

Construction is planned to take about four-and-a-half years, with the new dock becoming operational in 2016.

"With this new investment, we provide an answer not only to the growth of ship traffic on the left bank of the Scheldt but also to the increases in scale," Crevits commented. "A second lock will ensure more business security in the second most important port in Europe and allow it to defend its competitive position."♦

Judge found guilty in Fortisgate

Christine Schurmans will not receive a sentence but will appeal the decision

ALAN HOPE

Judge Christine Schurmans will appeal her conviction in the so-called Fortisgate case to the Court of Cassation, her lawyer announced last week. Schurmans was the only one of four senior judges found guilty of breach of their oath of confidentiality. The court, however, decided to apply no sentence, as allowed under Belgian law if the court finds there is no public interest in punishing the accused.

The case was a culmination of the crisis in 2008 over the fate of Fortis Bank, which is now owned by the French BNP Paribas. The court of appeal in Brussels, where Schurmans (*pictured*) and two other judges were sitting, was being asked to rule on the legality of the sale, organised by the government over the heads, plaintiffs argued, of the Fortis shareholders. One of the main criticisms was that the government had sold off the bank for a low price, instead of intervening to support it until it could ride out its difficulties.

Schurmans was on the bench, together with judges Paul Blondeel and Mireille Salmon, but while they took the side of the shareholders, she leaned more to the government's side. Schurmans was accused of having passed news of this division on to a friend and former magistrate. Later, according to a letter sent by the head of the Cassation Court to parliament speaker Herman Van Rompuy (see Face of Flanders, p2), representatives of the government attempted to put pressure on the two judges to make them change their minds. The revelation led to the resignation of prime minister Yves Leterme and federal justice minister Jo Vandeurzen.

The case against then-president of Cassation, Ivan Verougstraete, was not proven because, the court in Ghent found, there was nothing told to him that breached confidentiality. In the case against Salmon and Blondeel, meanwhile, there was not enough evidence to convict them of breach of confidentiality and an



© Dirk Waem / BELGA

additional charge of falsifying documents. Schurmans announced her immediate intention to file an appeal. "I don't understand the decision of the court at all," she told reporters after the verdict. "I'm been found guilty according to an extremely technical and academic approach because I asked for advice from a colleague. That is common practice

among judges, who, like doctors, have to be able to consult among themselves." Schurmans also faces an internal disciplinary procedure within the magistrate, but details of that are unlikely to be revealed until all available legal appeals have been exhausted. ♦

CEO reaches agreement with Belgacom board

CEO Didier Bellens reached an agreement with the board of telecoms company Belgacom to end the employment contract of Concetta Fagard. Fagard had been fired from her post at Belgacom earlier this year, and Bellens (*pictured*) came under intense criticism this month when he announced he was hiring her back.

Bellens and Fagard had both worked at TV station RTL, where he was CEO and she was his executive assistant. When he moved to Belgacom in 2003, she came also, and, in 2007, she was promoted to vice-president in charge of corporate social responsibility. Fagan was fired earlier this year, accused of bullying staff and using fear as a management technique. Her departure, which included a €600,000 severance package, was welcomed at every level of the company.

The board of the majority state-owned company finally threatened to resign en masse – a serious threat to the company's share price – if Bellens went through with his plan for the re-hire. Bellens has clashed with the Belgacom board

before; at the time of his re-nomination to the post in 2008, a majority of the board was against him continuing in the job, accusing him of a lack of vision and international ambitions. To be re-nominated, he was forced to give up some of the remuneration package that had made him one of the best-paid CEOs in the Bel-20 group of top companies.

Bellens issued a statement after the board meeting last week: "The director-general stresses that he appreciates her work and that he could make use of her qualities in some other capacity outside of NV Belgacom". That signals a return via a back door, through one of Belgacom's other properties, says opponents within the company.

Inge Vervotte, federal minister for government enterprises (including Belgacom) said: "My first priority has always been to find an agreement between the board of directors and the director-general. I am pleased that this has been achieved." ♦



© Nicolas Maeterlinck / BELGA

Shopping centre refused permit

Plans for a massive shopping, fitness and hotel complex on the site of the former Renault factory in Maelen have been cancelled after the province of Flemish Brabant last week refused to grant an environmental planning permit, claiming the site would cause insurmountable traffic problems and present a threat to further redevelopment work in the Maelen-Vilvoorde area.

The Uplace complex was planned to be the largest shopping centre in the country, a position now held by Wijnegem Shopping Centre outside Antwerp. It had predicted eight million visitors a year.

According to Jean-Pol Olbrechts, responsible for the province's policy on environment and economy, that's the equivalent of 25,000 traffic movements a day, based on a six-day week. "The traffic expected by the Uplace project would have a very negative effect on the roads in the area. It would therefore be necessary to implement a number of measures to ensure sustainable mobility, but the public transport networks of the NMBS [rail], MIVB [Brussels] and De Lijn [Flemish]

are not ready for that, with the result that thousands of people would be forced to spend time in traffic jams more often and for longer periods."

Uplace has already lodged an appeal with Flemish environment minister Joke Schauvliege. "An environmental permit is about things like heating, transformers, emergency generators," said Uplace COO Lorin Parys. "Mobility will be looked at in the context of a building permit." Uplace has already presented a mobility plan drawn up together with the federal roads agency, De Lijn and Maelen town council, which the province approved.

The company is also appealing Flemish Brabant's objections on the grounds of space. Flemish Brabant claims the site uses up too much of the available redevelopment land in the canal zone. Uplace points out that their site takes up only 11 of the available 290 hectares, not counting the 230 hectares left over from the province's own master plan. "The available space has already been set out by the Flemish government in its brownfield covenant," Parys said. ♦



THE WEEK IN BUSINESS

Beverage • Miko

The out-of-home coffee service specialist Miko, based in Turnhout, has acquired the Czech Excellent Pizen fair trade coffee and tea distributor.

Dredging • PMV

The Flemish government investment company PMV has acquired a 30% stake in Deme Blue energy, the affiliate of the Deme dredging group specialised in seeking alternative sources of energy in sea water.

Education • Vlerick

The Ghent-based Vlerick management school, one of the world's leading business education institutions, is to open a campus in downtown Brussels in September 2012 to expand its activities. The school already operates a campus in Leuven in addition to its headquarters in Ghent.

Materials • Umicore

The Brussels-based materials and non-ferrous metals group recently inaugurated its new €25 million battery recycling unit in Hoboken. With a capacity of 7,000 tonnes a year, the plan is to process up to 150,000 electric vehicles, or 250 million mobile phone batteries.

Packaging • VPK

The Erembodegem-based producer of corrugated board and cardboard is investing €30 million to build a plant in Leinefeld, Germany, its third in the country. The new unit, to come on stream in 2013, will use recycled fibres and will help strengthen VPK's position on the German market.

Telecommunications • Mobistar

The country's second largest mobile phone operator is investing €36 million over the next two years to renovate its network and implement equipments compatible with the fourth generation of mobile phones.

Textiles • Santens

French venture capital group Astrarce is paying at least €11 million to acquire the ailing Oudenaarde-based Santens textile group. The move is expected to save the Santens brand, which carries a long reputation for quality. Astrarce is expected to keep 200 of the company's 430 employees.

Transport • Thalys

The Thalys high-speed train will link Brussels Airport to Paris in 1h47 from 30 October. The move will allow French passengers to connect with the Brussels Airlines African network and Jet Airways routes to Asia and the US.

Wealth • Belgium near top

The total liquid assets of the Belgian population topped the €900 billion mark last year, according to the Roland Berger Strategy Consultants group. This amount, which excludes property, is almost triple the country's national debt of €357 billion. As a result, the Belgian population is among the wealthiest in Europe, after residents of Switzerland and Luxembourg, and is believed to be the eighth richest in the world.

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Going home to shop

Make an appointment in Ghent for some old-fashioned personal attention from the lady of the house

COURTNEY DAVIS

With an uncle who owns Movies, one of the trendiest clothing shops in Ghent, and a mother heading up the Fallen Angels retro and antiques shop on the other side of town, it seems only natural that Devi-Shri Vancoillie is also on her way to local fashion stardom.

Vancoillie is the owner of Be-Angeled, a private women's boutique, and creator of both a jewellery and a new handbag line. Although she might seem to have followed a pre-destined path, her career has been anything but typical. Soft-spoken and petting one of her two adopted dogs, she tells her story while her business and life partner looks on proudly.

"All the jobs that I've done in my life have helped me to do what I do now," she says. "At the time, I didn't know that it would all lend itself to today."



Amazed by her own success: Devi-Shri Vancoillie

That might explain how for three years Vancoillie has been everything from a stylist to a fashion photographer to an accountant. She has applied all she knows to create what can only be described as an impressive, consistent and noticeable style. Her home-made jewellery features bows and pearls, her colours of choice are pink and black, and the clothes in shop tend towards the feminine, the flattering and ethereal – but decidedly fashion-forward.

While not quite retro, there is a sweet '50s charm to both the shop and the couple who runs it. The cosy, intimate boutique feels more like a large walk-in closet than a store. Her "inspiration room", a tiny space off of the main entrance, is covered with pin-ups, and an old-fashioned vanity has been transformed to house thousands of beads for her jewellery production.

Rags to riches

It is this own line of jewellery that started the entire Be-Angeled story. In 2007, Vancoillie began purchasing pieces of jewellery from Spain and France and selling them to friends at monthly parties she hosted at home. Every time, friends would bring around sisters or co-workers and soon she was hosting several parties a week. Over time, she expanded to include handbags and belts.

The first time she brought shoes into the collection, they sold out in two days. Two months later, her first jewellery collection turned out to be equally popular. Business continued to grow, and, two years ago, she bought the shop, which doubles as her home on the upper levels.

And like a friend's house, you can't just walk in but have to ring the doorbell. In fact, on most days, you'll have to call in advance, for Be-Angeled is a private store with public shopping days limited to four per month.

There is a method to her madness. "We have all kinds of clients," Vancoillie explains. "From people on a budget who come with a specific amount in mind they want to spend, to those who simply come for the service and exclusiveness. There are others who prefer the privacy of being able to shop and change clothes without a crowd standing around. It's a bit of a refuge in here." Being a private shop also allows Vancoillie to maintain an exceedingly busy schedule. She visits Paris once a month to purchase a range of clothes – now some 1,000 pieces per trip – then packages, prices and photographs them all for the monthly newsletter. A price range of €20 to €60 explains why women flock to her shop the second week of every month to pick up yet another inexpensive yet totally exclusive fashion item.

Despite the increasing crowds on open days, Vancoillie still lights candles for ambiance and offers sparkling wine in the courtyard when the weather is nice. After all, it is her home.



Shop in private in the pretty Be-Angeled

There are plans for expansion to accommodate the growing list of invited shoppers, now more than 10,000. It's no surprise, then, that Vancoillie's own jewellery line is sold in more than 80 stores in Belgium, the Netherlands and France. She's quite amazed by the growing fame. When her jewellery line got picked up by the famed French lingerie designer Chantal Thomass, she couldn't believe it.

Her partner explained that Thomass is the Karl Lagerfeld of underwear. "No, not Karl," Vancoillie gently admonishes. "Coco Chanel."

→ www.be-angeled.com

Bust a move

Competition aims to select Flemish dance ambassadors

COURTNEY DAVIS

So You Think You Can Dance, Dancing with the Stars, Move Like Michael Jackson: TV these days is saturated with dancers popping, locking and crunking across the stage to hip-hop music. The dance world, previously considered formal, has shed its ball gown for street gear and the music of yore for something decidedly more modern.

The talent, though, is every bit as amazing, and the work it takes to look good every bit as gruelling. That is why Danspunt was founded. An organisation sponsored by the Flemish Region, it holds a competition to reward hard-working dancers in four categories – Folk, Modern/Jazz, Hip-Hop/Urban and Contemporary – with the title of Ambassador of Amateur Dancing.

"This contest helps us to determine who is best suited to represent Flanders abroad," organiser Ton Schipper says, "be it at a festival in Europe or farther away".

The next competition will be Hip-Hop/Urban on 5 November at the Entrepôt in Bruges. Seven teams will compete at an event called Dance

Kicks. Genres are hip-hop, funk, street dance, break dance and others. Whittled down from a large list based on submitted recordings, the teams will put on a spectacle of 10 to 15 minutes. The jury of five professional dancers and choreographers come together to announce the winner, not based on points but on overall appreciation.

The first edition of the event was in 2005. "I have seen it every year," says Schipper, the event's organiser for the last five years. "And every year, the quality of the dancing improves, as does the storytelling and the use of the stage, which is not easy in a real theatre. The performances are getting more artistic and nicer to watch."

They're not solo performances, he explains. "There are a fluctuating number of dancers who are telling a story on stage, an original piece that they themselves will have to have choreographed. The music tends towards hip-hop, but it can also be classical. People are very creative these days." ♦

→ www.danspunt.be



Lego's leading man

Dirk Denoyelle has turned the passion of many a child into an art form

PHILIP EBELS

The Zebrastraat is a well-known apartment complex and cultural centre in Ghent and will soon be showcased in miniature – using Legos. The owner of the building, known for his penchant for the arts, wanted to have something different on display. So he picked up the phone to call Dirk Denoyelle, the only Lego Certified Professional in Belgium and one of only 13 worldwide.

Denoyelle's home atelier in Hoboken, a municipality of Antwerp, is strewn with parts of the maquette.

"I've had to dismantle it to have some room for us to talk," he tells me. The roof of the thing is almost a metre high. It looks just like the bird's eye view in the photo he has on hand, including details like the winding staircase in the courtyard and the lanterns on the walls.

"I used the wizard wands from the Harry Potter series of merchandise to make those," he says. He did cheat a little, he admits, by sawing off the ends. "There are purists who would have a problem with that. But sometimes there's just no other way."

"People may not know my head, but they do know my heads"

Denoyelle has always liked to fool around with Lego blocks. He used to build whole towns as a kid, until he was 18 years old and other things in life began to demand his attention. "They call those years the dark ages," he says, not without a healthy dose of self-mockery – the time in a Lego-boy's life that he loses interest.

Enlightenment came on the seventh birthday of one of his daughters when a friend gave her a small box of Legos. "I went and got all the Lego I had stored away and began to build towns again," he says. "Supposedly for my daughter, but really for myself."

Ahead of the game

A comedian by day, Denoyelle was on stage during this time doing imitations of, among others, Flemish artist and musician Willem Vermandere. As an extra gag, he

built his head from Lego, to be revealed at the end of the show. "People liked it," he says, "and started to ask me to make others."

Since then, he's done Michael Jackson, Laurel & Hardy, Guy Verhofstadt, Raymond van het Groenewoud and many others. Today, he's a real celebrity in the Lego world. "People may not know my head," he says, "but they do know my heads."

Denoyelle, 47, considers his work to be an art form. "It's more than just recreation," he says. "I also try to tell a story. The eyes in my Charlie Chaplin can move, for example, and there's a reason why it's in black and white."

His goal is to do a tour of museums in Europe and show not only his heads, but also his buildings, including the Ghent towers (currently on display in the city's STAM museum) and two-dimensional mosaics. One of those is a 4 x 5 metre adaptation of Rubens' "The Adoration of the Magi". "I'm sure that it will happen," says Denoyelle. "It's only a question of time."

There are 70 Lego-clubs around the world, including one in Belgium, BeLUG, which has 150 members. "It's a real subculture," says Denoyelle. "There are forums, online marketplaces, conferences and other get-togethers where they exchange tips and tricks and sell those rare Lego pieces that have gone out of production." Topics on the BeLUG forum include: "I'm looking for 1 Black Fence 1x2x4 and 1 Tan Tile, Modified 1 x 1 with Clip" and "I've built Darth Vader's Super Star Destroyer". The Zebrastraat, meanwhile, is as good as finished. The only thing missing is the winding, spiralling sculpture on the roof by Flemish artist Nick Ervinck. Denoyelle grabs a couple of Lego bricks laying around and, with a twist of his hand, clicks them together in a way that it bends. "And that's how you make a curve," he says. Piece of cake.♦

» www.amazings.eu



Certified Lego professional Dirk Denoyelle next to his copy of Ghent's famous Sint-Baaf's Cathedral



Laurel & Hardy were made for the Flemish charity organisation of hospital clowns

STREEKPRODUCT SERIES

ALAN HOPE

Kaastaart

Two Sundays ago was the annual Grape Festival in Hoeilaart, Flemish Brabant, one of the main towns in what is known as the *druivenstreek*, or grape region. But the main celebration taking place had nothing to do with grapes: Another of the area's typical products, cheesecake, had just gotten recognition as a genuine Flemish *streekproduct*, or regional product.

Lovers of American cheesecake be warned: This local delicacy is nothing like the huge fruit-covered creations found in New York and Philadelphia. (The cheese of that name was first marketed for the making of cheesecake.) Of all the varieties made around the world, it's closest to the German version made using quark cheese, but with some quite distinctive features.

Cheesecake was invented, we think, by the Greeks, with the physician

Aegimus writing a book on how to prepare one (the Greeks use mizithra cheese from sheep or goats). But versions exist from Sweden to Japan, the differences being more significant than the similarities.

The cheesecake from the *druivenstreek* is a typical product brought out on feast days, when traditionally in decades past every housewife would prepare her own, taking it to the local baker to be baked (few homes in those days had an oven). It consists of a number of essential ingredients – apple compote, cream cheese or *plattekaas* and eggs – as well as a number of variable additions: rum, almonds, macaroons.

The base is dough, the cream cheese filling dense and creamy. When sliced, the cake should retain its shape. The topping is browned

in the oven to a golden caramel colour.

The flavour of the cheese should, in the best examples, predominate. *Plattekaas* is a somewhat sour cheese with a chalky feel in the mouth and, though it is sweetened with sugar in cheesecake, that sour taste of the curds should still be present. The layer of apple compote provides a note of sweetness and tartness at the same time. Try out the more exotic variants by all means, but the purists will maintain that any addition to the basic recipe is a needless embellishment.

The stamp of approval from VLAM, the Flemish government's agricultural marketing agency, has gone to seven bakers (the *kaastaart* is by far the best-selling item in all of the area's bakeries): two in Overijse, three in Huldenberg and two in Hoeilaart.



A grand old dame

The National Orchestra of Belgium turns 75 this season

MARIE DUMONT

The National Orchestra of Belgium has three fans. Well, actually, it has quite a few more than that – but three famous, official “fans” will be lending it their names and faces this coming season, as it turns the ripe old age of 75.

One of them is Kim Gevaert, the petite Leuven-born sprinter who brought back a silver medal from the Beijing Olympics in 2008. What few people know is that Gevaert is also a serious music lover who studied the flute and piano as a child and once dreamed of going professional – like her brother John, who is now a concert pianist.

The second fan is Ozark Henry, the lanky Flemish pop singer with a steely voice and eclectic tastes ranging from film to fashion. The third, French pianist Hélène Grimaud, is the only bona fide classical artist of the lot, although she enjoys a pop star aura due to her magnetic personality and, let's face it, dewy-eyed good looks.

All three will soon be seen across Brussels and Flanders, peering down from stylish black posters next to the words “Ik ben een fan”. A tram bearing the same slogan will shuttle back and forth between Brussels’ communes Schaerbeek and Ukkel. And there might even be a short advert on television, for the NOB has splashed out on unprecedented hype to mark the occasion.

A party season

Concert-wise, this promises to be “a party season” in the words of orchestra manager Albert Wastiaux. Between now and next summer, there will be gala concerts with prestigious soloists (Grimaud included), an elaborate Christmas event, several world premières, an avalanche of children’s performances and even the odd foray into crossover. Not to forget the lunchtime chamber concerts, the Queen Elisabeth Competition appearances and myriad other events that dot the life of the country’s flagship orchestra.

They seem to whisper to us that one needn’t be bald or geeky to like Mahler or Tchaikovsky

For the NOB, this jubilee season is a chance to spruce up its image at a time when “Belgian” and “National” are uncomfortable epithets to wear, and when classical music has a sore need of new, younger audiences. Hence the three fans: as the orchestra’s glamorous ambassadors, they embody just the kind of curious, independent-minded young people it hopes to attract. From their posters, they seem to whisper to us that one needn’t be bald or geeky to like Mahler or Tchaikovsky.

Classical in crisis

As things stand, though, symphonic orchestras are the poor parents of the ailing classical industry. Of the few people under 50 who actually listen to classical music, most prefer the crisp sounds of Baroque ensembles, the hushed intensity of chamber works, the edgy opera productions of De Munt or the weird experiments of new music.

State-funded symphonic orchestras, by contrast, are viewed as dull and dusty, stuck with the same unimaginative repertoire. They are also expensive to maintain (100 or so musicians on the government payroll cost taxpayers a lot more than a freelance string quartet), which explains why their modern relevance is sometimes called into question. The NOB, which relies on federal subsidies for nearly three-quarters of its budget (ticket sales account for less than 15%), has its share of critics. In the early noughties, former De Munt manager Gerard Mortier openly objected to such a large chunk of public money being spent on the



© Mat Hennek



© David Samyn

Faces of NOB: French pianist Hélène Grimaud and Flemish pop artist Ozark Henry

entertainment of a moneyed elite. He even suggested that the orchestra be ditched, adding that its role could be filled by the more competent Munt Symphony Orchestra and the saved millions invested in better concert facilities.

No one paid him much attention at the time, but the truth is that the NOB was in a sorry state, weakened by decades of infighting and poor management that had left musicians confused and discouraged. Despite chief conductor Yuri Simonov’s steady efforts behind the scenes to improve musicians’ standards, the orchestra’s heyday in the 1960s, when the charismatic maestro André Cluytens first put it on the world map, seemed very far away.

Saved by a rising star

Its fortunes turned in 2002, after Simonov left. The orchestra’s modest resources meant that it could either opt for a second-rate but experienced conductor or bet on a rising star. It chose the latter. Mikko Franck, a diminutive Finn who was only 23 when he took up the post, shaped the orchestra’s sound, breathed in clarity and depth, introduced contemporary composers (he is a fan of Rautavaara) and played mild havoc with the sacrosanct concert ritual. “There is no law that says every concert programme should consist of an overture, a concerto and a symphony,” he quipped at his inauguration press conference. A triumphant tour of Japan restored the musicians’ confidence and cohesion. “The phoenix is reborn to the world,” enthused a critic.

Franck was replaced in 2007 by Walter Weller, a 67-year-old Austrian and former concertmaster at the Vienna Philharmonic. His gifts to the orchestra have been a full, Germanic sound, luckily alleviated by the lighter touch and adventurous tastes of Stefan Blunier, the orchestra’s principal guest conductor since last year.

Meanwhile, the NOB had signed up with Fuga Libera, a young, dynamic record label with a mission to promote the best of Belgian music. CDs have been released to the tune of one per year, with a few gems among them.

Coming of age

So it looks like the 75-year-old ensemble is coming of age at last. “I love it here,” says Blunier. “It’s a nice change from German orchestras, which never seem to want to play piano. The mix here is just right, with power but also lots of fragile colours.”

“The orchestra’s in very good shape,” agrees Fuga Libera

founder and artistic director Michel Stockhem. “It’s versatile, at the junction of Germanic and Latin cultures. Like other local ensembles, it struggles to be recognised internationally, but that’s where recordings can help. Our Richard Strauss CD, which caused us endless grief to record, has had excellent reviews abroad.”

Everyone is now looking forward to the next step: the arrival of new chief conductor Andrey Boreyko next season. Boreyko, who’s from Saint Petersburg and has worked with the Berlin Philharmonic and Chicago Symphony, among others, is also a first-class programmer. “He has a very good feel for what can and should be recorded in today’s difficult climate,” says Stockhem. Let’s hope he manages to bring the NOB the recognition – and fans – it deserves.♦

NOB: the season’s best picks

- Angel-faced French pianist **Hélène Grimaud** brings her huge talent to Brussels and performs Brahms’ first concerto (21 & 22 October). More big-shot soloists will be invited throughout the season, including pianist **Maria João Pires** (18 March) and German tenor **Jonas Kaufmann** (15 April).

- The NOB **celebrates Christmas** with seasonal music by Tchaikovsky, Debussy, Prokofiev and others. Bittersweet drawings (pictured) by Brussels-born children’s illustrator Kitty Crowther are the icing on the cake (23 December).

- Composers Jean-Luc Fafchamps and Wim Henderickx are living proofs that Belgian contemporary music is alive and kicking. The NOB pays them tribute with two world premières: the latter’s first symphony ***At the Edge of the World*** (2 March) and the former’s haunting ***Lettre Soufie: Qâf*** (22 March).

- Anyone for crossover? Flemish pop singer **Ozark Henry** steps on stage to perform a selection of his songs with orchestral backing. Purists needn’t fret: the rest of the programme revolves safely around Berlioz, Tchaikovsky and Ravel (12 July).

- How does one get children interested in orchestral music? By giving them a chance to play. This autumn, select students from music academies will receive special coaching from NOB musicians, joining them for a performance of Tchaikovsky’s ***Sleeping Beauty*** (22 January). Sign up for an audition before 3 October at www.onb.be/kids.



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We have a new face



As one of the key global hubs for politics and business, Brussels is home to a massive international community and for the last five decades, one publication has been their bible – The Bulletin.

After an extensive redesign, The Bulletin is back this September with a brand-new look and a renewed focus on everything the international community needs to know about what is happening in the capital of Europe. The Bulletin will be packed with exclusive interviews, expert analysis and your definitive guide to lifestyle & culture in Brussels and Belgium. The agenda will also be back in The Bulletin, covering the highlights in and around Brussels.

TRY IT OUT !

Request a free trial of three issues by visiting www.thebulletin.be/ft as of September 8.

THE
Bulletin

Agenda

COMEDY

Don't let the photo fool you; Seann Walsh is in fact a very funny man – in a sort of absurd, self-deprecating kind of way. The British comedian who made his breakthrough four years ago is today perhaps best known as the motor-mouth from Brighton. Walsh's delivery is self-assured and quick to the punch. At the acclaimed Edinburgh Comedy Fest, he had the audience rolling in the aisles during a sold-out show entitled *I Would Happily Punch Myself in The Face*. You might want to get there early, and not only because the bar opens at 19.00 and a scrummy Indian meal is served shortly thereafter, but because Walsh's performance is preceded by two fellow funny countrymen: Josh Widdicombe and Phil Butler.

(*Robyn Boyle*)

→ www.standupworld.com/brussels



Stand Up Brussels

24 September, 20.30

Théâtre 140, Brussels

MORE COMEDY THIS WEEK

Eeklo (East Flanders)

Comedycafé De Luxe: Multi-faceted Flemish artist Kamagurka tries out his new act, plus supporting show by up-and-coming comedian William Boeve (in Dutch)
SEP 23 20.30 at CC De Herbakker, Pastoor De Nevestraat 10
www.ccdeherbakker.be

Mechelen

Bert Gabriels in Druk Druk Druk (Busy Busy Busy): A full evening of situation comedy with sketches by the Flemish comedian (in Dutch)
SEP 24 20.30 at Moonbeat, Oude Brusselsestraat 10
www.moonbeat.be/prm

Oostmalle (Antwerp province)

The Line-Up: Four stand-up comedians in one night, hosted by MC Joost Van Hyfte: Jeroen Leenders, Veerle Malschaert, Han Solo (in Dutch) and Jovanka Steele (in English)
SEP 23 20.00-22.30 at De Notelaar, Lierselei 21
www.thelineup.be

Smashing Pumpkins

7 November, 20.00-23.00

Vorst Nationaal, Brussels

MORE ROCK THIS WEEK

Across Flanders

Ozark Henry: Flemish musician Piet Goddaer plays favourites from his last six albums on two pianos, featuring appearances by up-and-coming artists
SEP 21-22 20.15 at De Kortrijkse Schouwburg, Schouwburgplein 14, Kortrijk
SEP 24 19.30 at Het Depot, C. Deberiotstraat 24, Leuven
SEP 26 20.00 at Ancienne Belgique, Anspachlaan 110, Brussels
<http://tinyurl.com/6xd7a6h>

Kortrijk

Ganglians: Poppy, '60s-style garage band from California, with supporting act by British band The Lovely Eggs
SEP 25 20.00 at De Kreun, Conservatoriumplein 1
www.dekreun.be/live/event/ganglians

Leopoldsburg (Limburg province)

Stoned Again: Rolling Stones Tribute by five look-alike musicians who know all the Stones' greatest hits
SEP 27 20.15 at CC Leopoldsburg, Kastanjedreef 1
www.ccleopoldsburg.be

NEW MUSIC

"How can music express the apocalypse?" is the question at the heart of this engaging, witty, shamelessly cerebral and at times violently disturbing performance by Flemish ensemble Bl!ndman. Its founder, Eric Slechim, is a superlative artist with something of a split personality, constantly hovering back and forth between the avant-garde and the intricate polyphonies of Bach and his predecessors. The concert pits these two sound worlds against each other: poised cantatas by 17th-century composer Heinrich Schütz, composed on the aftermath of the horrendous Thirty Years War, are rendered beautifully by a sax and a voice quartet, then give way to screeching sounds, disjointed video footage and the pleading, gasping voice of singer Cristina Zavalloni – the sole survivor, it seems, of some future disaster. In between is a debate between two musicologists discussing the current craze for Baroque music, the importance of harmony and the writings of Theodor Adorno. You'll soon find your head swimming with questions but don't expect them to be answered, as notions of hope, beauty, modernity and aesthetic enjoyment dissolve into a bewildering jumble. (in Dutch and English, with subtitles in Dutch and English)
(Marie Dumont)

→ www.desingel.be



MORE FAMILY EVENTS THIS WEEK

Antwerp

Antwerp Giants Family Day: Annual family day for fans of the professional basketball team, featuring merchandise, bouncy castles, tombola, jenever bar and more, plus the official presentation of the team, followed by autograph and photo sessions with the players
SEP 25 13.00-18.00 at Lotto Arena, Schijnpoortweg 119
www.antwerpgiants.be

Ghent

Poppenkast Zuetezoen: Puppet theatre group performing *Noten voor Ganga* (Nuts for the Ganges), an entertaining story for young and old about India in all its colourful glory
SEP 25 15.00 at DOK Beach, Koopaardijlaan/Afrikalaan
www.dokgent.be

Leuven

Blauwe Storm (Blue Storm): Premiere of the dance performance and choreographer Randi De Vlieghe's latest creation for kids (ages six and up)
SEP 24 15.00 at 30 CC Schouwburg, Diestestraat
www.fabuleus.be

 FOOD & DRINK

Slow Food: it's a concept that is – slowly but surely – creeping back into mainstream culture. With this fourth edition of Proef Brussel (Taste Brussels) themed "From Farm to Table", organiser Karikol aims to highlight a lesser-known side to the capital city – one that is green and eco-conscious, an overall nice place to discover with all five senses, especially your taste buds. Choose from a whole range of taste-inspired activities, including a guided walking tour through the organic market on Sint-Katelijneplein, a visit to the studio of artisanal chocolate-maker Laurent Gerbaud, a cooking workshop using all local, organic products. Or learn how to create your own vegetable garden at home, whether you have lots of space or just a small balcony. Rather slide your legs under a table to experience the best environmentally friendly food Brussels has to offer? Then visit one of the 71 restaurants across town that have put together a special Slow Food menu. The week ends on Sunday with a potluck picnic at Warandepark, where the cost of entry is bringing a dish to share (RB).

→ www.proefbrussel.be



Proef Brussel

1 Until 25 September
Across Brussels

MORE FOOD & DRINK THIS WEEK

Ghent

English Afternoon: Tea time at the museum with a variety of English-related activities including a guided tour of the John Constable exhibition by Mary Poppins and her Magnificent Five (in Dutch), guided walk through Citadelpark, acoustic sessions and DJ sets, cricket on a big screen, cupcake workshops and more

SEP 25 13.00-18.00 at the Museum of Fine Arts (MSK)
www.mskgent.be

Londerzeel (Flemish Brabant)

Gouden Kiekenpootworp (Golden Chicken Foot Toss): Annual folk tradition in Londerzeel (in the past known for its numerous chicken farms) involving the tossing of thousands of chicken feet from atop town hall to down below where visitors gather to catch as many as possible in order to win prizes

SEP 24-25 at Town Hall, Grote Markt
www.feestelijjklaanderen.be

Tienen (Flemish Brabant)

Local beer market: Week-long celebration of beers from the Hageland region, with tastings and workshops

SEP 26-OCT 2 in and around the Museum Caf , Grote Markt 4
www.erfgoedsitetenien.be

Five Years of Radio Modern

30 September, 21.00
Vooruit, Ghent

MORE PARTIES THIS WEEK

Ghent

New-wave Classix: Newest edition of the nostalgic party featuring new-wave club classics and synth-pop from the 70s, 80s and 90s

SEP 24 22.00-5.00 at Vooruit, Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 23
www.vooruit.be/en/event/2889

Leuven

STUK Startfeest: DJ dance party to kick off the cultural venue's new season

SEP 29 23.00 at STUKcafe, Naamsestraat 96
www.stuk.be

Merksem (Antwerp)

Vila Cabral: Hot southern-atmosphere party featuring Buscemi & Squadra Bossa and DJ set Molotow Cocktail Party

SEP 23 20.15 at Cultuurcentrum Merksem, Nieuwdreef 135
www.vilacabral.be



or ponytails, so stop by the Modernettes' Beauty Boudoir & Barber Shop for a festive hair and make-up session à la Elvis or Marilyn. Then have your new look captured forever on film at the Fifties Photo Corner. (RB)

 PARTY

Radio Modern is blowing out five candles this month with a swinging party you won't want to miss. Legendary saxophonist and first-rate entertainer Ray Gelato takes the stage together with Flanders' very own, very soulful Lady Linn. Hips will have no choice but to swivel to the be-bopping music of the 1950s. No worries if you don't quite know (or remember!) how to do the jitterbug, hand jive or lindy hop, retro dance move extraordinaires Gr goire & Apollo Swing will be there to lead by example, plus there are dance workshops and demos going on. And it wouldn't be a Radio Modern party without those poodle skirts, quiff hairdos

→ www.radiomodern.be

Utopia :: 47 – A Very Last Passion

September 23, 20.00
deSingel, Antwerp

MORE NEW MUSIC THIS WEEK

Bilzen (Limburg province)

The Clement Brothers Play Sing Sing: Brush up on your Dutch song classics because members of the MartHa!tentatief join violinist Gorik Elaut and guitarist Jonas Van den Bossche for a classical sing-along of the Flemish kind

SEP 24 20.15 at CC De Kimpel, Eikenlaan 25
www.dekimpel.be

Massmechelen

International Choral Contest: Top choral groups from Belgium, the Netherlands, Ireland, Russia, Hungary and more vie for first place in this annual prestigious competition

SEP 23-25 at CC Massmechelen
www.lkv-maasmechelen.be



DUSK 'TIL DAWN

KATRIEN LINDEMANS



Hindu Nights

24 September

Vooruit, Ghent

The annual Hindu Nights parties have become a sensation since they were first organised in 2008. Beats and trebles are banned from the dance floor; instead, rock 'n' roll is your guide for the evening. The edition this weekend in Ghent's Vooruit is dedicated to the late Amy Winehouse (pictured). If rock music can draw hundreds of thousands of people to summer festivals every year in Flanders, then surely we'd all be up for an autumn party with nothing but poppy guitars. And that's how the first edition of Hindu Nights was born. The crowd got served by DJs playing, for example Oasis, Arctic Monkeys, Blur, New Order and, yes, Amy Winehouse. This Saturday, every DJ devotes some of his tracks to the singer-songwriter, who passed in July at age 27.

The line-up features some fine British music makers. Manchester's Jeff Wootton, for instance, who joined The Gorillaz on their last tour and is now part of Liam Gallagher's new band Beady Eye. Fellow Manchesterite Phil Smith will be present too: He's the tour DJ of the other Gallagher brother's band, Noel's High Flying Birds. The Gallagher presence is, in fact, assured at most Hindu Nights – eldest brother Paul is one of the regular Hindu DJs (though he's not there this weekend). Also this weekend, expect a soulful DJ set by Katia Vlerick, the music journalist behind the former radio programme Rock Ahoy on rock radio Studio Brussel. Some of the regular Hindu Radio DJs will be there too. Don't forget to pop into the Icon's Bar, where Gigolo's in retirement mix Elvis and The Beach Boys with Oasis and Franz Ferdinand. Later in the evening, the Dilly Boys serve some Britpop classics. We're starting to see why the Gallaghers call this party a "mad rock 'n' roll carnival". Tickets to Hindu Nights are €12, available in any Free Record Shop or on the Hindu Nights website. Don't expect any to be left at the door.

→ www.hindunights.be

bite

ROBYN BOYLE

Le goût avant tout ★★★

My guess is that fondue restaurants across Flanders made bank this summer. Considering the exceptionally wet weather, it comes as no surprise that people would make the best of it by going out to enjoy this special treat typically reserved for winter.

And so the restaurant with the name meaning "taste above all" has our group scurrying down Ghent's Ketelvest alleyway on a Friday evening in late July, umbrellas in hand, dodging puddles. Once inside, we hang up our jackets in a separate hallway (handy tip from a friend, to avoid them reeking of hot oil) and take our seats in the packed dining room.

The tables have stove-top burners built into them and elegant place settings of light grey linen, white plates, long-stemmed wine glasses and flickering candles. Happy to be warm, dry and cosy, our group of 10 promptly orders three bottles of both red and white bold South African wines.

We then start discussing who wants what: fish, meat or cheese fondue, or stone grill. We all want fondue, so the fish eaters shift to one end of the table while the meat eaters shift to the other. I stay put in the middle with the only other fan of cheese

fondue. The reason for sitting together is this: You have to cook your own food. A variety of bite-sized pieces of raw meat arrive on small plates, some containing different cuts of lamb, others holding chicken, beef, meatballs and sausage, plus here and there some courgette and mushroom. These go on your skewer and into a big pot of hot grape seed oil. After a few minutes, the meat is cooked through, tender and full of flavour, thanks to this particular kind of oil.

Same concept with the fish, although this goes into a bubbling pot of seasoned bouillon instead of oil, which makes fish fondue all the more healthy. Not only that, but the few bites of white fish and prawn that I sneak off my friends' plates are extremely tasty and succulent. I promise myself I'll come back and order the all-fish fondue platter.

We cheese eaters are happy, too, as we use bits of crusty white bread to sop up gooey, melted Swiss cheese. The fondue is excellent and rich in flavour, despite having a tad too much white wine in the mix.

Thankfully, they keep bringing us salad as a counterweight: an overflowing bowl of crispy fresh watercress, carrots, *witloof*,



© Johan Martens

cucumbers and ripe red tomatoes. It just keeps coming; every time a bowl is emptied, another one arrives. The same goes for the house-made fries.

Of particular importance to the natives at our table are the six bottomless bowls of sauce to go with the meat and fish: spicy, garlic, tartar, mayonnaise, cocktail and mustard.

The portions turn out to be just right, with nobody leaving hungry. The bill is surprisingly mild – around €35 a head.

But it's the quality of the ingredients that counts the most, and these are top notch. Taste above all indeed.

→ www.legoutavanttout.be

► Ketelvest 8, Ghent; 09.329.59.59

🕒 Tues-Sun, 18.00-22.00
Sun 12.00-14.00

€ Main dish: €20-€30

👉 High-quality fondue and stone grill dining in a fun, social atmosphere

Contact Bite at flandersbite@gmail.com

TALKING SPORTS

Two cheers for the great Genk

The city of Genk in Limburg province has a population of just under 65,000, which is only about 10,000 more than the capacity of Valencia's Estadio Mestalla. That's quite something when you remember that the local side, Koninklijke Racing Club Genk – KRC Genk, Racing Genk, or just Genk to fans – last week drew 0-0 with Valencia in its second tilt at the European Champions League.

The football match itself was at Genk's 25,000-capacity Cristal Arena, which is tiny in European terms yet one of the biggest in Belgium. And simple mathematics suggest that the team's fan base is culled from far beyond the town itself. Indeed, even in Belgian terms, Genk's story is quite remarkable.

The club was founded in 1988 with the merger of local Limburg sides KFC Winterslag and Thor Waterschei. The first eight years saw no fewer than 12 coaches before Aimé Anthuenis arrived, turned their fortunes around and won them the Belgian championship on the last day of the 1999 season.

Anthuenis promptly left, and Genk went through 11 more coaches, but still won the title in 2002, and again last year. But true to form, Franky Vercauteren, who guided them to victory last May, left in August for a lucrative job with Abu Dhabi's Al-Jazira Club.

Genk fuses home-grown talent with shrewd foreign purchases: their title was fired by the 20 goals of Bilzen-born Jelle Vossen, 15 from his strike partner Marvin Ogunjimi from Mechelen, and bolstered by a further 14 from Israeli winger Elyaniv Barda. The captain is David Hubert from Brussels, and the vice-captain is Hungarian Dániel Tőzsér.



LEO CENDROWICZ

Genk reached the group stage by beating Israel's Maccabi Haifa and Serbia's FK Partizan in qualifying rounds. Their ambition is to simply do better than their first spell in the Champions League in 2002, which saw a meagre four draws and two defeats – although that still compares favourably with the rubbish recent records of other Belgian sides in the competition, like Anderlecht and Standard Liège.

Worth mentioning is that one of their group opponents is Chelsea – which just bought Anderlecht's Romelu Lukaku – and have long been eying Genk's Kevin de Bruyne. Oh, and Chelsea also bought Genk's goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois this summer.

But it is only two cheers for Genk. The new coach, former Feyenoord boss Mario Been, has had an indifferent start to the domestic season, and Genk currently lie in the mid-table. "Mariodona", as Been has been nicknamed, still has his work cut out to ensure tiny Genk maintain their impressive record.

→ www.krcgenk.be

THE LAST WORD . . .

Artist license

"You can never stick your tongue out far enough in art."

Maverick artist Jan Lauwers, co-founder of performance group Needcompany

Consumer confidence

"We know our small reserves will not be enough in difficult times, but that's not what we're counting on. Our city is growing every year with new companies coming in. That will bring new income."

Kristel Strubbe, alderwoman in Mechelen, which has the smallest cash reserves in Flanders

You go, girl

"I say so myself, I've always had a big mouth. There were nine of us at home. You have to make yourself heard."

Groen! member Meyrem Almaci will lead the list in Antwerp, going up against heavyweights like Patrick Janssens and Bart De Wever

Cold comfort

"The thing that scares me is that winter is on the way, and there are already no accommodation places left."

Cecil Jodogne, acting mayor of Schaerbeek, on the ejection of homeless people from the North Station in Brussels

NEXT WEEK IN FLANDERS TODAY #199

Feature

Platteland tourism in Flanders is taking off like a rocket. If you want to know why, what it means to the economy or what *platteland* means, don't miss our cover story next week

Focus

Right this minute an underwater device is being operated by the University of Ghent to explore the Antarctic coast. It recently discovered a colony of King crabs washed ashore by a surfeit of warm waters, which they suspect is a result of global warming. We'll tell you what else they're finding out

Arts

Remember when American artist Spencer Tunick was at Gaasbeek Castle photographing our fellow Flemish citizens in the nude? See his work up close and personal now at the exhibition *Sleeping Beauties*