The dark side of Bruges

It’s a film Flanders’ hasn’t even seen yet, but In Bruges is already boosting the city’s image around the world

Alan Hope

There’s nothing like a couple of contract killers to boost the tourism profile of a city. And if you can throw in a seedy porno shoot and a fat man taking a nose-dive off the most famous landmark, so much the better. That’s why the businesses and officials of the city of Bruges are delighted with the new film In Bruges by Oscar-winning director Martin McDonagh. Though it’s been released in other countries already, the dark comedy won’t reach cinemas here until 2 July. The film was conceived by McDonagh, an Irishman who is mostly known for his award-winning plays. A few years ago, he made a trip to Bruges and found the city at once charming and oppressive. "While I was there, I had diverging feelings about the place," he said. "I started thinking of two characters who might respond to Bruges in distinct ways, and I started writing about them, with specific parts of Bruges for them to interact in and around." In the story, a hit man named Ray (played by heartthrob Colin Farrell) is hiding out in the city It’s a film Flanders’ hasn’t even seen yet, but In Bruges is already boosting the city’s image around the world

Suicide problem must be tackled

Flanders has Europe’s second-highest suicide rate

Alan Hope

The Flemish parliament needs to put youth suicide to the top of the agenda, starting with a fundamental inventory of the steps that are being taken to prevent the problem, according to politicians in the welfare committee of the parliament, led by Open-VLD deputy Anne Marie Hoebeke. She repeated calls made last month by Open-VLD chairman Bart Somers for a “broad and serious debate” on the psychological problems of children and young people, after therapists warned that they were dealing with growing numbers of children with suicidal thoughts, increasing cases of self-harm and children as young as seven showing the typical symptoms of burn-out. Therapist An Michiels blamed the stresses of society both indirectly, through parents, and directly in school and described the children as “canaries in the coalmine” that warned of problems in society as a whole.

“There have never been so many measures in place as there are now,” Hoebeke said. “Yet the number of burned-out children is higher than ever.” Flanders is second only to Finland in the EU, with a suicide rate...
**Bruges-la-Morte**

A gangster film set in Bruges.

You must be kidding. But, no, as Alan Hope writes this week, this ancient Flemish city of canals and lace shops has inspired the crime thriller *Bruges*. Tourists are already flocking to the city in search of the locations used in the movie.

It isn’t the first time that Bruges has been teeming with location hunters. In 1892 the Belgian writer Georges Rodenbach’s often-decile novel *Bruges-la-Morte* put the old town on the literary tourist trail. This slim volume illustrated with 35 grainy photographs of canals and crumbling buildings tells the story of Hugh Viane, an English expatriate who settles in Bruges after the death of his wife. “The town, so glorious of old and still so lovely in its decay, became to him the incarnation of his regrets,” wrote Rodenbach.

On one of his solitary wanderings through the city, Hugh comes across an actress called Jane Scott, who reminds him of his wife. “The town, so glorious of old and still so lovely in its decay, became to him the incarnation of his regrets,” wrote Rodenbach.

Jane Scott, who reminds him of his wife, strangles her with a lock of his hair. Rodenbach. The novel inspired several paintings by Fernand Khnopff, a German opera and, according to some film critics, the plot of Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*. Nor has it lost its mesmerising power, the Japanese novelist Yukio Mishima is said to have reread *Bruges-la-Morte* shortly before committing ritual suicide.

Now tourists are coming again to visit the locations of *Bruges*. Armed with the movie location map published by the tour office, visitors are hunting out spots like the Jan van Eyckplein and the strange Jeruzalemkerk, both of which also figured in Rodenbach’s novel. It seems that the old Flemish town is once again living up to its name as la morue.

Derek Blyth

A new translation of Georges Rodenbach’s *Bruges-la-Morte* by Mike Mitchell, with an introduction by Allen Hollinghurst, was published by Dedalus Press in 2005.

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**Cathy Berx**

Last week Cathy Berx, a university law lecturer and mother of two, was inaugurated as governor of Antwerp province, a job that seems like something left over from Napoleonic times. Berx has historically been considered a rising star in her party (CD&V); she is said to have outgrown his power and became to him the incarnation of his regrets, “wrote Rodenbach.”

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**TALKING DUTCH notes on language**

**Rekening**

Thankfully, I was sitting down when I opened my utility bill. I double checked the address, but that didn’t help. The Dutch for “bill”, *rekening*, does call up images of the food redacting. Where was all this gas and electricity going? Well, the best way to get most people to change their ways is through their pockets, and I’m no different. But what to do to keep these energieverbruikers down? As usual would have it, a folder dropped through the letter box this morning with tips on how to use less energy.

- Zet de verwarming op maximum 19 of 20°. Onze heating is set at just that.
- Zet de verwarming lager. “s ‘s ochtend en wanneer u er niet bent.” That seems logical; we turn down the heating at night and when we are not home.
- Schuif ‘s nachts de gordijnen. Again, closing the curtains at night is a habit.
- Zet de douche niet tot het laatste moment. That’s obvious: we save water and don’t linger in the shower.
- Probeer het gebruiken van de droogkast. Laat uw was drogen. Very funny. Of course we should limit the use of the tumble dryer, but most of the year you can’t dry your washing outside.
- Zet de koelkast niet tot het laatste moment. Now that is something I’ve only recently started doing.
- Koop spaarlampen. Buy energy-saving lamps. But not for a reading lamp; they hum. Clearly, this list is not going to restore my fortunes. Perhaps I should have solar panels installed. There are subsidies for zonneopervlakken, but they cost a lot and how long do they last? Or should I go whole hog and have own passiesbuil? A little research tells me that is most likely going to cost you so to isolate dat nozzels verwarming nodig. So it’s possible to install a building so that it hardly requires any heating, perhaps a passive house is the only solution in the long run. But first I need to pay this rekening.

Alistair MacLean

online

www.mileswtendraywinkel.be
**FEATURE**

### Doing In Bruges

The city of Bruges is so excited about *In Bruges* that—even before anyone here has seen it—they’re offering special packages to tourists from countries where the film is already out.

The tourist office has a locations map featuring scenes from the film. (Though it has to be said most of them would be on any tourist map of Bruges anyway.) The map also publicises three restaurants and 12 hotels who are taking part in a promotion. According to Chris Meyll, the owner of Café-draal (in Zilverstraat), the film has already provided huge publicity. "Some scenes were shot here in the dining room. I’ve just taken a reservation from 33 people in Italy who will be coming to eat here," he says. His restaurant offers a special menu with the chance to win film memorabilia, like posters and T-shirts.

### Belgium – den of killers?

The movie industry loves serial killers and hit men. Way out of proportion to the frequency with which such types show up in real life. *Flanders Today* was unable to unearth any record of a contract killer in real life in Bruges, although the city’s prison did for a time last year play host to Yugoslav killer-for-hire Josef Vas, who was transferred there after trying to escape from Ghent, where he was serving 36 years for three murders. Vas paid a guard in Ghent €15,000 to smuggle in a gun to assist the escape, but the plot was foiled. He got an extra four years on top of his sentence, and the guard got five years.

One of the few confirmed cases of a Belgian contract killer was James Capiau, who was born in Brussels and served in the French Foreign Legion. He was killed in Zagreb in 2001 by the bodyguard of local mafia boss Věžko Slisko, who Capiau had just assassinated. In Belgium, though, contract killers tend to be fades. Either they’re the victim of a sick joke, like the 17-year-old student in Antwerp whose details were attached to an advertisement on the 2dehands.be website under *Holiday Work*: “I can do any kind of murder... the more gruesome the better.” The website called in the police.

Or the hit man is a copper in militia, as Laurent Kusé of Beveren discovered to his cost in 2004 when the man he ordered to kill his wife turned out to be an undercover police officer. Kusé was already on remand for shooting the aforesaid wife in the head, but failing to kill her. He was later sentenced to 25 years, with the failed hiring of the hit man seen as an aggravating factor.

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A warm welcome to Belgium!
We hope your days here are happy ones.
At KBC we’ll be glad to settle you in by providing you a full bank and insurance service.

Anne Marie Azijn and Leo Verhoeven, KBC Expat Advisers
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www.kbc.be/expats
Action needed to fight youth suicide

Continued from page 1

total for all age-groups that is 50% higher than the average 27 men and 10 women per 100,000 people. Suicide is the leading cause of death among people in their 20s and 30s and also among men in their 40s. For young people under the age of 20, it is the second-leading cause of death after road accidents.

In September last year, Flemish welfare minister Steven Vanackere announced he was tripling the budget for the region’s anti-suicide action plan, from €473,000 in 2006 to €1.55 million. Research from the University of Ghent estimated that one in 10 of all adolescents had self-harmed, often by cutting, or had made a suicide attempt. The figures for teenage suicide in Belgium are two and a half times higher than in the Netherlands. The chatlines and phone-lines that deal with suicide in Flanders take nearly half of all their calls from young people under the age of 18, and 80% of them are girls.

According to research carried out by the education magazine Klasse, one in four people in Flanders under the age of 15 has psychological problems, with half of them (13%) in a serious condition, but only one in three receives professional help. For the school population, the figure is around one in three with problems such as depression, behaviour disorders like ADHD, anxiety and sleep problems, while others are living with a parent who has psychological problems ranging from depression to addiction. Cases among children are more likely to come to light as teachers and other school staff members spot the outward signs, but there is still a stigma attached to psychiatric illness, the magazine said.

Klasse cites a 2006 study which showed that 35% of male secondary school students had thought of suicide at some point, with the proportion of girls as high as 49%. And the magazine launched a four-point plan for what it called “a preventive teaching style”:

- Provide security, clarity and structure, with clear rules and sanctions that apply to all and a place to talk about problems, family and friends.
- Emphasise the worth of every student, without discrimination, and provide a sympathetic ear to all.
- Emphasise healthy relationships, use tutors and buddies, fight bullying.
- Take care of the body as well as the mind, with health education, proper nutrition and physical activity.

Copies of the full plan will be supplied to all 180,000 teachers and 20,000 trainee teachers in the Flemish education system.

Online www.klasse.be
www.zelfmoorpreventie.be

Offi cials on gangster’s hit-list kept in the dark

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wo Belgian officials are on a hit-list drawn up by French-Canadian anti-gangster Jean-Claude LaCote, currently on the run from justice but the South African authorities in charge of the case haven’t informed anyone here. The list was found by police investigating LaCote’s escape from a prison in Johannesburg last month, where he was awaiting trial on charges of fraud. The list is headed by Irish businessman Noel Hanley, a victim of the fraud who used his own money to track LaCote down when police failed. The list also features South African journalist Carine Hartman, two lawyers and a South African detective.

The two Belgian officials have not been named, and their identities were not communicated to the prosecutor’s office in Bruges, where LaCote is wanted for the murder of a British man 12 years ago. “We don’t know who is concerned,” the prosecutor Jean-Marie Berkvens told reporters last week. “We are not communicating this list.”

Foster homes sought for old people

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he rural home-help group Landelijke thuiszorg (LT) is looking for volunteers to take in elderly people for day care once a week or more often. The programme includes those who no longer have contact with their own families, and who, for various reasons, cannot be left alone all day. The programme is being funded by the Flemish health ministry to the tune of €75,000. A spokesman said the pilot project would be picked up again when the subsidy runs out in October. A similar project in Antwerp recently had to close because of a lack of funds, while a Dutch project based in Terneuzen operates a similar scheme involving a sister organisation in Ghent. Volunteer families are paid only expenses. “In the last few days we’ve found about 50 volunteers,” said Ann Vanhoutte, nout of LT. Volunteers can register at the website of the Catholic Rural Women’s organisation KVVL of which LT is a part.

Online www.kvvl.be

Polio drug could foil terrorists

A new molecule discovered by researchers at the Brussels Free University (VUB) could prevent the spread of polio and also protect whole populations against bio-terrorism using the polio virus. Polio is one of the major diseases thought to be at risk of being used by terrorists. The molecule would be used to prevent those already infected from passing the sickness on in their immediate environment in countries where vaccines are too expensive to be widely used. The World Health Organisation had planned to eradicate the disease, which causes paralysis, by the year 2000 through a campaign of vaccinations. But “contrary to what researchers originally thought, it’s not so simple to wipe out polio with vaccines alone,” said VUB researcher Bert Thyss.

Limburg highest-rated in poll

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mburg province has the most positive image in Flanders, according to a survey carried out by market research bureau Compagnie. Respondents to the telephone and online poll were asked to rank the provinces according to how green they are, how friendly and considerate they are, the most irritating accent and where would be best to live, work and holiday. Limburg was voted greenest by 63%, with 38% keen to spend the weekend there and 23% willing to go and live there. The people were voted friendliest by 45% of those polled.

The people of Antwerp, on the other hand, have the most annoying accent, according to 30%, while 62% considered Antwerpers to be too arrogant. Antwerp also scored lowest for friendliness and came top of the list of provinces according to how green they are, how friendly and considerate they are. The people were voted friendliest by 45% of those polled.

Dental prostheses supplied by Chinese manufacturers contain dangerous substances, including lead, zinc and magnesium, and break more easily than those made here, according to CD&V deputy Raf Terwengelen. Dentists are increasingly making use of Chinese-made bridges and plates, which cost as little as half the price of those made here by dental technicians. The EU has begun an investigation into the question, and Terwengelen called on health minister Laurent Onclin to take action.

The inner ring of Brussels will be a car-free zone on 11 May between 7.00 and 19.00. Traffic will continue to circulate over the inner ring itself and in the tunnels, but the area within the ring will be restricted to public transport, taxis, emergency services and other public vehicles, with free parking in interparking garages around the inner ring. Normally car-free Sunday takes place in September, when roads throughout the Brussels region are affected. Indeed, the celebration of the Brussels region, will also take place on 11 May.

The concert that closes the traditional Feast-day of the Flemish community on 11 July will be broadcast live from the Grote Markt in Brussels by the VRT, following an agreement reached last week with Bart Anciaux, Flemish minister for culture and for Brussels. Last year Anciaux paid VTM €115,000 to broadcast the concert after the VRT declined, claiming Flanders was more than just Brussels. But the broadcast on VTM’s channel will be split between Brussels and the Grote Markt in Saint-Niklaas, where there will be an outside broadcast of the popular singing show Zb or in evenen, taking place at the same time.

Belgian intelligence services are investigating a number of computer attacks, which they say show all of the signs of industrial espionage coming from China. Among the targets were email servers belonging to the federal government, attacked using the virus-like object known as a “Trojan horse”, which infiltrates a computer and can then be controlled remotely. According to justice minister Jo Vandever, “China is particularly interested in Belgium because Nato and the EU are based here, and also because we have many links with Africa.”

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Neo Nazis could be prosecuted

The Kortrijk prosecutor is looking into the possibility of a criminal prosecution of neo-Nazi members of the Blood and Honour group who took part in a commemoration of Hitler last month. The investigation follows undercover footage shown on theVRT news programme Kupon in which participants listened to music and speeches calling for death to Jews, Muslims and gays, as well as other statements which, the prosecutor said, are in clear breach of racism laws.

The prosecutor was due to meet this week with police, state security (which monitors extremist groups) and senior magistrates to decide if a prosecution was appropriate.

Blood and Honour has been under close scrutiny since last year, when it was revealed that senior members of a related group were serving members of the armed forces. Several planned meetings or concerts have been banned by local authorities, but the 19 April gathering received no advance publicity, in a successful attempt to thwart any official reaction. Some 300 neo-Nazis gathered in Belgium, coming from France, Germany and the Netherlands as well as Belgium.

The footage was filmed by German undercover journalist Thomas Kuban, who infiltrated the group four years ago and has been tracking their activities ever since. Belgium, he said, is a “paradise” for neo-Nazis, who are glad to come here from Germany in particular, where their own activities are strictly controlled. In Belgium, by contrast, hate speech is barely considered by the authorities. “The Belgian police do nothing about it,” he said on the programme.

According to interior minister Patrick Dewael, the Kuppen footage shows “beyond a doubt” that the law has been broken. And he expressed support for a total ban on organisations such as Blood and Honour. Socialist deputy Peter Vandeveldehoven, has already presented a proposal to ban the organisation by declaring it a private militia – a proposal which has gained the support of Green and Open-VLD.

Campaign seeks to lure Flemish to Brussels

A new campaign launched last week by the Flemish Community Commission (VGC) aims to attract Flemish families to the capital. With the slogan “Word waker in Brussel” (Wake up in Brussels), the VGC hopes to convince students and commuters of the attractions of living in the city. Metro stations and public transport (tram lines 24, 25, 92 and 94) will be decorated with images of bathrooms and breakfast tables to extol the virtues of leaving the commute behind. The publicity points potential residents to the website, which lists properties to share, rent or buy.

Minister Guy Vanhengel, launching the programme, said the VGC hoped to achieve its aim with a three-pronged approach: making the urban way of life cool for young people, cutting the costs of living in the city to make it easier for young families and making city life more agreeable with an extended metro, more daycare and parking and better crime-fighting policies.

Antwerp needs to grow to meet demand

The port of Antwerp will need to acquire more handling capacity by 2016 if it is to cope with projected growth in container traffic, Eddy Bruyninckx, director of the port, told the Flemish parliament last week. The parliament was holding hearings on a proposal to build a new dock on the left bank of the Scheldt. The Deurganckdok, opened in July 2005, was the last major addition, bringing about six million TEU (equivalent to three million containers) of capacity. It was the third tidal dock to be constructed on the left bank and cost an estimated 43 billion. But the idea of building a new dock, the Saeftinghekod, is not without its opponents. Bruyninckx and the port’s leading civil servant, Marc Van Peel, are both in favour and want work to start as soon as possible. Against them stand those led by Groen! politicians – who fear an increase in traffic congestion and the environmental effects that will bring.

Online
www.woneninbrussel.be

New metro doors “will increase security”

Brussels public transport authority MIVB last week began testing new security doors at metro entrances designed to increase security and cut fare dodging. Four sets of doors – including sliding panels which only allow access to platforms when a valid ticket has been presented – were installed at Delta station. The supplier of the successful doors will be chosen on the basis of how the doors work in practice, the MIVB said. Installation of new doors will begin this year, but they will only become operational in July of 2009, with the whole network equipped by 2011. The doors are designed to operate with the planned new MOIBB chip-card, which only needs to be presented along a scanned

Online
www.mivb.be

News Flash

Distant relatives of the late heiress Marie-Antoinette Carlier have lodged an objection to her decision to bequeath her fortune to the King Baudouin Foundation. Carlier died last October, left land and artworks worth some €200 million to the foundation.

Neo Nazis could be prosecuted

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The federal police could take industrial action at the end of May if their demands for more resources for pay and benefits are not met. Police union representatives said the action would not aim to inconvenience the public, but a blockade of the port of Antwerp being considered as one option. Police claim they need more money in order to ensure security and maintain road safety. The Brussels King could be another target of their actions. “We know that the public will be put out by that,” said a union representative, “but we will warn them in advance”.

A small group of protesters gathered at the weekend outside the centre for asylum-seekers at Merkbeek, near Turnhout, following the suicide of a man there last week. Elvener Folefack Sontsa, 32, came to Belgium from Cameroon three years ago. Last week an attempt was made to repatriate him, which he resisted. Later that day, he was found hanged in his room. An investigation is under way into allegations of violence by police at the airport, including a claim that video footage shot by a bystander was destroyed by police.

Socialist trade union ACOD last week started its outright opposition to an idea floated by Flemish liberal politician Herman De Croo to allow the private sector a greater role in the building and running of prisons. General secretary Guido Anciaux warned De Croo of proposals for "the generalised privatisation of the prison service," including security and personnel.
Mining the past
Abandoned coal mines could be reopened to extract methane gas

Leander Schaerlaeckens

In the United States it represents commonplace around the world coal mine concessions. Powered by gas have been identified in the old billion cubic meters of methane could be imminent as some seven
don its coal industry back in 1983. The Limburg mines are currently owned by the Limburgse Recons-verse Maatschappij (LRM), which was created in 1994 after the last mines had been closed and its workers paid off. The idea was to support the Limburg economy by investing in existing businesses that wanted to convert to another product. LRM was also put in charge of NV Mijnen, under which all mines were assembled in 1968. As such, both Frère’s company and the Australians will have to go through the LRM to exploit the mines.

The LRM was surveyed for them by the Vlaamse Intelligent voor Technologisch Onderzoek (VITO), which estimates the amount of readily accessible gas (extraction probability of 90% or more) at 7.7 billion cubic meters and thinks the concessions could contain a total of some 31 billion cubic meters (although most of it would be harder to reach).

According to Ben Laenen of VITO, Flanders Region contains some 50 to 55 billion cubic meters of easily winnable coal bed methane – enough to provide Flanders’ gas needs for about a decade. The field in Limburg will be mined only for coal bed methane, since the loose pockets of abandoned mine methane are negligible to the point of being unprofitable.

It will take approximately 15 years to exploit a gas field such as the one in Limburg. Laenen says, meaning the annual output would be less than half a billion cubic meters of gas. Flanders consumes about five billion cubic meters a year meaning that its untapped resources could eventually supply at least 10% of the region’s require-ment — vastly reducing its need to import and, thus, curbing its sensi-tivity to global gas prices.

But it could be five years before production even begins; a test-drilling hasn’t even been done yet. That alone will take several years — and gauging whether the gas is of sufficient quality and quantity to be profitable will take several more.

“We think the exploitation will be on a small scale,” says LRM expert Yves Marchal. “You should think of this project as one with a long-term regional impact that isn’t likely to result in pipelines all over Flanders. This industry is beginning to mature elsewhere, but it is still new in Flanders.” Miracles shouldn’t be expected from the new venture just yet, in other words. But, in time, it could significantly reduce gas prices all over Flanders.

To that effect, Albert Frère, Belgium’s richest man, wants to descend back into the coal beds of Limburg through his holding company Nationale Portefeuille Maatschappij (NPM) in search of the covetted gas. Along with Australian company Euro-pean Gas Limited (EGL), the 82-year-old steel magnate turned investor hopes to tap into the bil-lions of cubic meters of methane that is readily accessible.

NPM has invested more than €36 million in EGL through a daughter company, which enabled the Australians to buy the French firm Gazonor, which, like EGL, is a specialist in the extraction of coal bed and coal mine methane. More importantly, Gazonor owns the exploitation rights to four coal mines in Northern France and one in Italy. Together, the consortium hopes to operate in Flanders, too.

The Limburg mines are currently owned by the Limburgse Recons-verse Maatschappij (LRM), which was created in 1994 after the last mines had been closed and its workers paid off. The idea was to support the Limburg economy by investing in existing businesses that wanted to convert to another product. LRM was also put in charge of NV Mijnen, under which all mines were assembled in 1968. As such, both Frère’s company and the Australians will have to go through the LRM to exploit the mines.

The LRM was surveyed for them by the Vlaamse Intelligen-ting voor Technologisch Onderzoek (VITO), which estimates the amount of readily accessible gas (extraction probability of 90% or more) at 7.7 billion cubic meters and thinks the concessions could contain a total of some 31 billion cubic meters (although most of it would be harder to reach).

According to Ben Laenen of VITO, Flanders Region contains some 50 to 55 billion cubic meters of easily winnable coal bed methane – enough to provide Flanders’ gas needs for about a decade. The field in Limburg will be mined only for coal bed methane, since the loose pockets of abandoned mine methane are negligible to the point of being unprofitable.

It will take approximately 15 years to exploit a gas field such as the one in Limburg. Laenen says, meaning the annual output would be less than half a billion cubic meters of gas. Flanders consumes about five billion cubic meters a year meaning that its untapped resources could eventually supply at least 10% of the region’s require-ment — vastly reducing its need to import and, thus, curbing its sensi-tivity to global gas prices.

But it could be five years before production even begins; a test-drilling hasn’t even been done yet. That alone will take several years — and gauging whether the gas is of sufficient quality and quantity to be profitable will take several more.

“We think the exploitation will be on a small scale,” says LRM expert Yves Marchal. “You should think of this project as one with a long-term regional impact that isn’t likely to result in pipelines all over Flanders. This industry is beginning to mature elsewhere, but it is still new in Flanders.” Miracles shouldn’t be expected from the new venture just yet, in other words. But, in time, it could significantly reduce gas prices all over Flanders.

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Brussels Airlines
Brussels Airlines is engaged in extensive talks with Germany’s Lufthansa to develop joint commercial opportunities that could lead to merger discussions. The Brussels-based carrier, created out of the bankrupt national airline Sabena six years ago, is 29% owned by Virgin Atlantic, Richard Branson’s airline, and by 35% of this country’s blue-chip company. Brussels Airlines had made it clear earlier this year that it needed to join one of the world’s leading airline alliances – OneWorld, Skyteam or Star Alliance – before the summer to meet the challenges of the slowing economy and the surge in oil prices. In partnering with Lufthansa, the Belgian carrier would join the Star Alliance network that includes United Airlines from the US, Singapore Airlines, Swiss, British47

Midiweek and Air Canada.

Besix
Besix, the Brussels-based building group, has won a €1.9 billion contract to build a train network in Dubai. The service would in-clude unrestricted access and is expected to be in operation by 2011.

Lukoil
Lukoil, the Russian group that acquired the Jet network of 157 petrol stations in Belgium and Luxembourg, has plans to acquire up to 200 additional outlets over the next three years. The move would make Lukoil the country’s leading retailer.

Opel Antwerp
Opel Antwerp, the assembling affiliate of German-based GM, has received confirmation that it will be the company’s only European production line for SUV vehicles from 2010.

Solvay
Solvay, the chemical and pharmaceuticals company, is to take over the Ghent-based InnoGenetics biotechnology company for €177 million. Solvay had been a 6.7% shareholder of InnoGenetics since 1997 and was keen to acquire the firm’s diagnostics activities to speed up its own development capacity.

Jan de Nul
Jan de Nul, the Antwerp-based dredging company, is on track to book up to €1 billion in contracts in the next few weeks to develop and expand the port of Mersera in Qatar and for developing and construction works in Peru, Trinidad, Brazil, Honduras and Australia.

Van Hool
Van Hool, the Lie-based bus and truck assembler, is believed to be in takeover negotiations with an Indian automotive group. The family-owned company has been building buses since 1947 and is seeking a partner to further develop its activities.
Shareholders of the bank-insurer Fortis expressed their disapproval at last week’s Annual General Meeting (AGM) over the level of executive pay, following the revelation last month that managing director Jean-Paul Votron will this year take home €1.3 million in basic salary, up from €750,000 last year. His bonus for 2007 stands at €2.5 million. “Votron’s salary has been brought into line with what other top managers earn in similar banks,” chairman Maurice Lippens explained to shareholders. He also pointed out that the board had decided to increase Votron’s salary in 2006, but he had declined to accept a raise at the time. The bonus was a reflection, Lippens said, of “outstanding leadership” in the previous year, in which Votron had overseen the takeover of ABN-AMRO.

Colruyt launches electronic coupons

No-frills supermarket chain Colruyt was due this week to launch its latest breakthrough in cut-price shopping – an electronic card containing all the special offers available to each customer, which can be scanned once at the checkout and take the place of coupons clipped from newspapers and free-sheets. Colruyt claims that the card is unique in Belgium: unlike fidelity cards, discounts are not accumulated for the future but are given immediately, the company says. In addition, repeat visits will automatically give access to repeat discounts within the period of validity. Customers with privacy concerns, meanwhile, will still be able to use printed coupons. The electronic card replaces a more restricted non-magnetic version of the card launched a year ago.

Workers vote to elect union reps

Elections started this week to elect union representatives in some 6,000 companies. The three main unions, the Christian ACV, the socialist ABVV and the union ACLVB are fielding a total of 141,000 candidates. Elections vary according to the size of the company concerned: in companies of fewer than 50 staff, no elections are necessary. For companies with between 50 and 100 employees, elections take place for representatives to the Committee for Prevention and Protection at Work, which the ACV currently dominates, gaining shares every year at the expense of the ABVV, while the tiny ACLVB remains constant.

In companies with more than 100 employees, in addition to the elections to the Committee, representatives are also elected to sit on the health and safety sub-committees, required for larger enterprises. Social elections, as they are called, take place every four years. Voting runs until 18 May.

Proximus staff rebel

Staff at the headquarters of mobile telephone company Proximus turned up for work on Monday to find the entrance blocked by union members protesting at “hidden restructuring” which they alleged was being carried out by parent company Belgacom. The picket consisted of about 35 of the 2,000 employed in the HQ in the North Station area. A “symbolic picket” of a few protestors at the nearby Belgacom tower caused no disruption. The unions claim Proximus departments are being restructured without any plan having been agreed with them first. The action was expected to have the most impact on the customer service section of the building. Another picket is to be organised for 22 May.

Leterme to clear sale of Distrigas with Sarkozy

Prime minister Yves Leterme is expected this week to discuss the final stages of the takeover of Distrigas, when he met French president Nicolas Sarkozy on a visit to Paris. The sale of Distrigas is a condition of approval of the merger of Gaz de France (GDF) and Suez. The shortlist for the acquirer contains three names: EDF of France, Germany’s E.ON and Italy’s ENI. The last is the favourite with the Belgian government for a number of reasons, not least a bid of around €4 billion, well above Distrigas’s current book worth. ENI’s arrival would also do more to ensure competition on the Belgian market, with three main players: Suez-GDF, ENI and Belgian-British concern SUEZ centrica. The discussion is likely also to cover the value of Distrigas transit contracts for the transport of gas via its network to third parties. Suez values the contracts at €1.2 billion, but the Belgian gas regulator says the contracts are not binding. A compromise has been proposed putting a value of €500 million on the contracts, which, if agreed, would clear the way for the disposal of Distrigas to its new owner, possibly at the end of this month, followed soon after by the merger of GDF and Suez.

Businessman buys back company after ten years

Jo Vaessen, known as the tough chairman of Genk football club, has paid as much as €100 million to buy back the company he sold 10 years ago – radiator manufacturer Vasco, now known as The Heating Company (THC). “Figuratively, you could say I have got my baby back,” he says. Vaessen set the company up in 1975 and steered it through troubled times to turn it into the market leader, then in 1998 the American-owned Masco made him an offer he couldn't refuse – around four billion BF, or €100 million in today's money – the sum he has just paid to buy it back. In the meantime, Vaessen has built up another company supplying ceilings, aluminium profiles and lighting. His aim: to double Vasco’s sales, which last year reached €140 million. “It was a business decision,” he says. “In business there is no place for sentimentality.”

Fortis chairman Maurice Lippens (left) and CEO Jean-Paul Votron during the Fortis AGM.
**EXHIBITION**

**Other faces**

They came from all over to fight in the trenches of Flanders.

A new exhibition focuses on the forgotten minorities.

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**MUSIC**

**Jef Neve Trio premières new album**

Jef Neve has done what many jazz pianist can only dream of: broken out across genres, beyond, as he says, the circle of "pure jazz connoisseurs". Neve was the first artist signed to Universal Music in Belgium, which has rewarded him with international sales. "Our public has grown, and a lot of young people are now coming to see our shows," he says.

After two self-produced albums – Blue Saga in 2003 and It’s Gone the following year – Neve signed to Universal in late 2006. With the release of Nobody is Illegal early last year, the trio saw its intense recordings of voices and music.

The title Soul in a Picture came to Neve, he says, when he joined a project initiated by students at the Institute for Audiovisual Arts and Techniques in Brussels. "I was inspired while composing a new song, and I felt something like a breach of privacy, as if they were looking right into my soul."

Throughout the album, Neve incorporates inventive elements: "A Waterfall Never Comes Alone" inspired by the waterfall at Coo in the Belgian Ardennes, and the piano lead is accompanied by Verbruggen’s percussion, triggered to an electronic synthesizer.

Last week, the trio premièred Soul in a Picture with a free concert at Klara studios, part of the weekly live series he himself hosts. He’s been doing the show since last year. "It was a great challenge for me, as I’m not a radio man," he says. "I learn a lot, and it’s an excellent opportunity to put the spotlight on domestic jazz talent."

Marc Maes

Catch Jef Neve on Fridays from 19.00 to 21.00 on Radio Klara

**Online**

www.jefneve.be

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**Tour dates**

7 May Vooruit, Ghent
8 May Anison belgo, Brussels
9 May De Wondere, Turnhout
10 May Akkoest festival, Bilzen
5 June De Roma, Antwerp

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**ARTS**

**EXHIBITION**

**Other faces**

They came from all over to fight in the trenches of Flanders.

A new exhibition focuses on the forgotten minorities.

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Strange archaeology

The Guillaume Bijl exhibition asks questions of the viewer that are hard to ignore

Lisa Bradshaw

Lonely in a crowd: Bijl’s empty spaces emphasise an inherent desolation

EXHIBITION

The 61-year-old’s self-titled exhibition at Smak in Ghent brings together many of his installations from the last 25 years. Some of this, but also new work, makes up the “Flanders Extra Fair” on Smak’s ground floor. Viewers walk down a red carpet past gallery after gallery of retail merchandise, organised like a consumer fair. The perfect bedrooms and bathrooms appear before you with brand name items like the Innuendo mattress by Latexco and slogans such as “The feel is the deal.”

On the same floor are more of what Bijl calls “formatted environments”: perfectly realised offices with a variety of public services. In one, you can sign up for Belgian military service, another is one of those interminable phone centres surrounding by plush trappings, desks, computers, waiting areas – the offices are complete except, rather eerily, for the absence of people.

These offices are so realistic that, in previous installations outside museums, people wandered in to sign up for driving school lessons or to book a holiday. As an exhibition, however, it becomes clear how ludicrously profit-oriented they are. Bijl’s Thomas Cook office, for instance, is so grey and dull you’re overwhelmed by the stark contrast between it and the actual holiday you’re going there to book.

The wedding planner’s office is completely devoid of aesthetic beauty – which is what they are there to sell.

While the consumer fair takes you out of the role of everyday participant, forcing you to consider why and how you participate, the offices project a complete sense of emptiness and isolation, like you are the only person left on earth. The question then arises: are these the kinds of relics we want future archaeologists to unearth?

This theme of history and archaeology, indeed, runs through the entire show, which continues with the stage from a “Miss Flanders Beauty” contest and an adjoining VIP disco lounge: precise copies of silver-fringed, purple-lighted modern tackiness.

Perhaps the most effective installation on this floor, though, is Bijl’s recreation of a cinema simply showing the final 30 minutes of the recent American disaster epic Deep Impact. Formulasic and peppered with dialogue so ridiculous, you begin to wonder if it’s a real movie or if Bijl managed to convince Morgan Freeman and Elijah Wood to star in a spoof of the genre. But it’s real, and in this context, something you might easily sit through in the cinema becomes more clearly recognisable as nationalist propaganda. (I uncomfortably glanced around at the rest of the audience, hoping they wouldn’t be able to tell I’m an American.)

The other half of the exhibition is on Smak’s first floor, where you’ll find many installations in Bijl’s Cultural Tourism series. “The Concise History of Prehistoric Man” is made up of three scenes that mirror what you might see in a natural history museum, where we spend time admiring the relics and important evolutions of past generations. Compare this with social-history-as-spectacle back downstairs, Bijl appears to be saying.

You’ll also find Bijl’s six “museums”, which are brought together for the first time at Smak. Nicely designed to look like separate buildings, each one carries a theme, like “the Bidet Museum” or “Souvenirs of the 20th Century”. My favourite section, here, though, is the installation titled “The Chair in Art: From 1980 to the Present in the Flemish Ardennes.” Poking fun at contrived exhibition themes, Bijl has commissioned all the multi-media works in the room from artists specifically for his “fictional” show. He’s made up names to place next to them, but the show includes work by Flemish artists Luc Tuymans and Koen van den Broek.

What the artists have contributed to an ironic theme – and how it all adds up to looking like a real, thoughtfully-curated exhibition – is fascinating.

Although it takes awhile to get comfortable with the form of super-reality Bijl offers, Smak’s exhibition is at once comprehensive and intimate look at a Flemish artist who could be considered a modern archaeologist. Through it, it’s easy to understand what Bijl meant when he made his famous statement: “I don’t think an artist creates. An artist testifies.”

Until 6 July. Smak, Citadelpark, Ghent

Online

www.smak.be

Docville

Unless a documentary is made by Al Gore or narrated by George Clooney, it’s probably going to be under-released and definitely underrated. Docville steps in for the fourth year now to fill the void. The festival brings the best of the world’s documentaries to Leuven from 10 to 17 May for a week of harrowing Andean mountain journeys, American war protests, Russian delinquents and music from across the globe. Admittedly, some of these films have no trouble finding an audience – like Alex Gibney’s Oscar-winning Taxi to the Dark Side, a shocking look at America’s torture techniques in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guatemala, and Shine a Light, Martin Scorsese’s masterful homage to the Rolling Stones. But it’s also an outlet for other outstanding work you will not see anywhere else.

Mr Untouchable is a stylish portrait of Leroy “Nicky” Barnes, the renowned ringleader of a 1970s New York heroin empire. Director Mark Levin, who so often tackles such subjects, is as seduced by the glamour and the legend as he is weary of it. Barnes has been in the Witness Protection Program after giving up his collaborators 10 years ago, and Levin films him in silhouette surrounding by plush trappings, only adding to the intrigue.

Gonzalo Arjona’s Strandel tells the story of the two Uruguayan football players who wandered across the snow-covered Andes for 10 weeks after their plane crashed in 1972. Amid a media frenzy, they admitted they had to eat “the bodies of our friends” to survive. Alone in Four Walls, meanwhile, is German filmmaker Alexandra Westmeier’s poetic study of boys in a Russian reform school, where one might be spending time for petty theft or for multiple murders.

Both war and music figure heavily in the fest this year and sometimes powerfully intersect such as in War/Dance by Sean Fine and Andrea Nix, who have won a number of awards for their portrayal of former Ugandan child soldiers competing in a music and dance festival.

Docville also screens Sand and Sorrow, Paul Freedmans film about the devastating situation in the camps of Darfur. It emotionally effective without resorting to tactics, and its beautifully narrated by, er, George Clooney.

Online

www.docville.be

“I have come from a plane that crashed on the mountains”: the jaw-dropping story of the Uruguayan football players who survived the Andes
It’s a jungle out there

Though much needed, the expansion of Antwerp Zoo is ruffling a few feathers

Monique Philips

T he Antwerp zoo, a major attraction for tourists and locals alike, has been hoping to expand for a very long time. Finally, for the first time in its 150-year history, extensive plans have been drawn up to add an extra 1.5 hectares to the animal park. To accommodate the expansion, all the houses in the adjacent Ommeganckstraat and Ploegstraat have been bought up and demolished. All except one.

The zoo is still negotiating with the owner of the last house in the Ommeganckstraat. But Goedele van Hooydonck is determined to stay put. “My grandparents bought this place in 1915. My mother grew up here, and I grew up here. This house will always remain immensely valuable to me,” she told the Gazet van Antwerpen in 2005 in her one-and-only interview with the press.

In the meantime, the zoo and its architects have been battling neighbourhood associations about noise and the appearance of a construction wall being built to shelter the east side of the zoo during the first phase of expansion. This could all go on awhile: the project is not due to finish until 2020.

The Ghent firm Robbrecht and Daem won the architectural competition to design the zoo expansion. Among its high-profile contracts are the Concertgebouw in Bruges and renovations to both the Flanders Opera house in Antwerp and the Book Tower in Ghent. That they call their style New Simplicity, a term taken from late 1970s German composers, who were backing away from the high rise office buildings of the late 1970s German composers, who were backing away from the high rise office buildings of the 1970s.

Simplicity, a term taken from Antwerp and the Book Tower in Bruges and renovations to the entire zoo is a protected monument, and its buildings cannot be destroyed. But the pavilion (which actually houses kangaroos) is in the way of development. The zoo could move it, as they have done before with a historical birdhouse. As luck would have it, the Rhino Pavilion is right next to Van Hooydonck’s house.

Van Hooydonck remains reluctant to speak to the press, as she links her previous comments to the media with a barrage at her house.

So, what will happen with the Rhino Pavilion and the last house standing? “As it is, they rather block our plans,” admits Deboutte. “But there’s still time.”

The neighbourhood, though, is rallying around Van Hooydonck, as they all suffer from urban planning going over on their heads. Mana Claeys, spokesman for the seven neighborhood committees grouped in the area called De Ploeg, explains how the centrally-positioned Provinciaalstraat serves as a dividing line between two very different districts: the newly built high rise office buildings around the Kievitplein and the residential streets of the Borgerhout district.

The drive through Ommeganckstraat, she argues, is De Ploeg’s only link with the city centre. “We’re fighting to replace the lost 32 front doors with something better or at least equal,” she explains. Though Claeys has been invited to meetings of the zoo project’s steering committee, there hasn’t been a meeting in quite awhile, she says. “It worries us as we fear the zoo is going ahead with its considerations without us.”

The neighbourhood is thrilled about the windows in the temporary wall erected on their corner. “This openness and outlook on the future has given us an immense uplift, and we hope the zoo and the city will grant us these qualities permanently.”

Part of the neighbourhood committees’ staunch protest is a result of previous disappointments. The Kievitplein is considered a city sell out. They were promised a large green space in between a few low blocks, but the place is bare save the welded-steel of the Harobaat art sculpture, dwarfed by tall office blocks.

On the other hand, a very interesting project is underway in the Ploegstraat. Repossessed by squatters, a 1910 Dominican Cloister has become a beehive of social activity, with several organisations moving in, including a volkskeuken, in which locals can cook, eat and talk together, and plenty of space for cultural activities. Let’s hope this communal network continues to provide some human-size counterweight for the crimes circling above.

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Danielle Colsool

Danielle Colsool is the director of Welzijszorg, a poverty action association. She talks about the misconceptions — and the truths — of poverty in Belgium

What is your organisation's mission?

Every person has certain inalienable rights: the right to education, to work training, to health, to culture and to recreation. But there are a lot of people who are doing without all those, especially the poor. So we try to help them stand up on their own two feet and fight against social exclusion. We also try to inform the general public, which is often unaware of the problems confronting the poor.

Compared to other places around the world, Belgium has a very generous social welfare system. It's surprising that there are poor people here.

It's true: Belgium in general has a good social safety net. In fact, 50% of the population would be in danger of falling below the poverty line — which is €800 per month net for a single person, €1,700 a month for a family of four. As it stands, 15% of Belgians live below the poverty line, which is too many.

How is Welzijnszorg funded?

Ten percent is from the government and the other 90% is from private donations. A lot of those donations came from churches before, but as people are attending church less and less, that source has dropped. Private donations, though, fill the gap. We are affiliated with the Catholic church, but we don't proselytise.

Why did you get involved with this cause?

I was raised by parents who thought it important to have a social conscience toward developing countries, so I studied social work. After graduating, I worked for years on health issues. Welzijnszorg actually came into being almost 40 years ago as an offshoot of Broedelijk Delen, an organisation that deals with poverty in the Third World. People realised that, while it was good to help those suffering in foreign countries, we also had people here at home who needed help. That's what Welzijnszorg is all about. Six years ago, I started volunteering here, and a year ago I came on board as the director.

What has Welzijnszorg achieved over the years?

Well, there are many small, unquantifiable contributions we try to make to people's lives, as well as larger accomplishments. For example, there have recently been problems due to rising fuel costs pushing up people's utility bills. When someone hasn't paid the bill, the electric and gas companies cut the supply to a minimum. That minimum has been raised, thanks to our campaigning, along with other organisations. So now families can burn more than just one light bulb until they get enough money together to pay their bill. In the past, we campaigned for a minimum base income for everyone. Every year, we have a campaign in December to raise awareness on a pressing issue: last year was education; this year will be health. We meet with the government to make requests that they meet certain goals, and we gather public support through petitions.

You've worked with the poor for some time. How has the situation changed over the years?

A decade ago, Welzijnszorg was pretty much the only player in Flanders addressing poverty. Now there are other actors: we work with unions, Catholic hospitals and schools, as well as the government and NGOs. There are networks now that we can take advantage of, which means we can help people more... and help more people.

What are the biggest misconceptions about the poor?

First, there is a tendency to blame people for being poor. They think that people must be poor because of the bad choices they've made in life. But there are many factors that contribute to poverty. Second: they think that all poor people have to do is to decide to get out of their situation, and then they'll be better. But it's far from that simple. I always say that one cannot work for the poor; one has to work with the poor. That's a large part of our mission — bringing the poor and others together, even on something as simple as a trip to the coast or to a museum, which is a big thing for them.

What difficulties do you encounter with poor people?

It's a challenge to get them to think and act in their long-term best interests. A lot of them have an unhealthy lifestyle, with bad diets and habits like smoking. But it's hard for them to consider long-term implications when they are just trying to make it from day-to-day. So we try to teach them how to cook healthy, inexpensive meals, for example. It's trying to get them to work for the long term, which they don't even think is a possibility.

In terms of alcoholics, drug addicts and the mental ill who are poor, did poverty bring them to these conditions or is it the other way around?

I don't really explore that because it's not particularly helpful in solving their problems. Again, that leads to blaming someone for his bad situation, rather than trying to help someone get better.

Can the public help?

We are always in need of volunteers and donations. We have a staff of 15 in Brussels and 12 others working throughout Flanders, plus assorted volunteers whose contributions are substantial. But we always need more help.

Interview by Steven Tate

online
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