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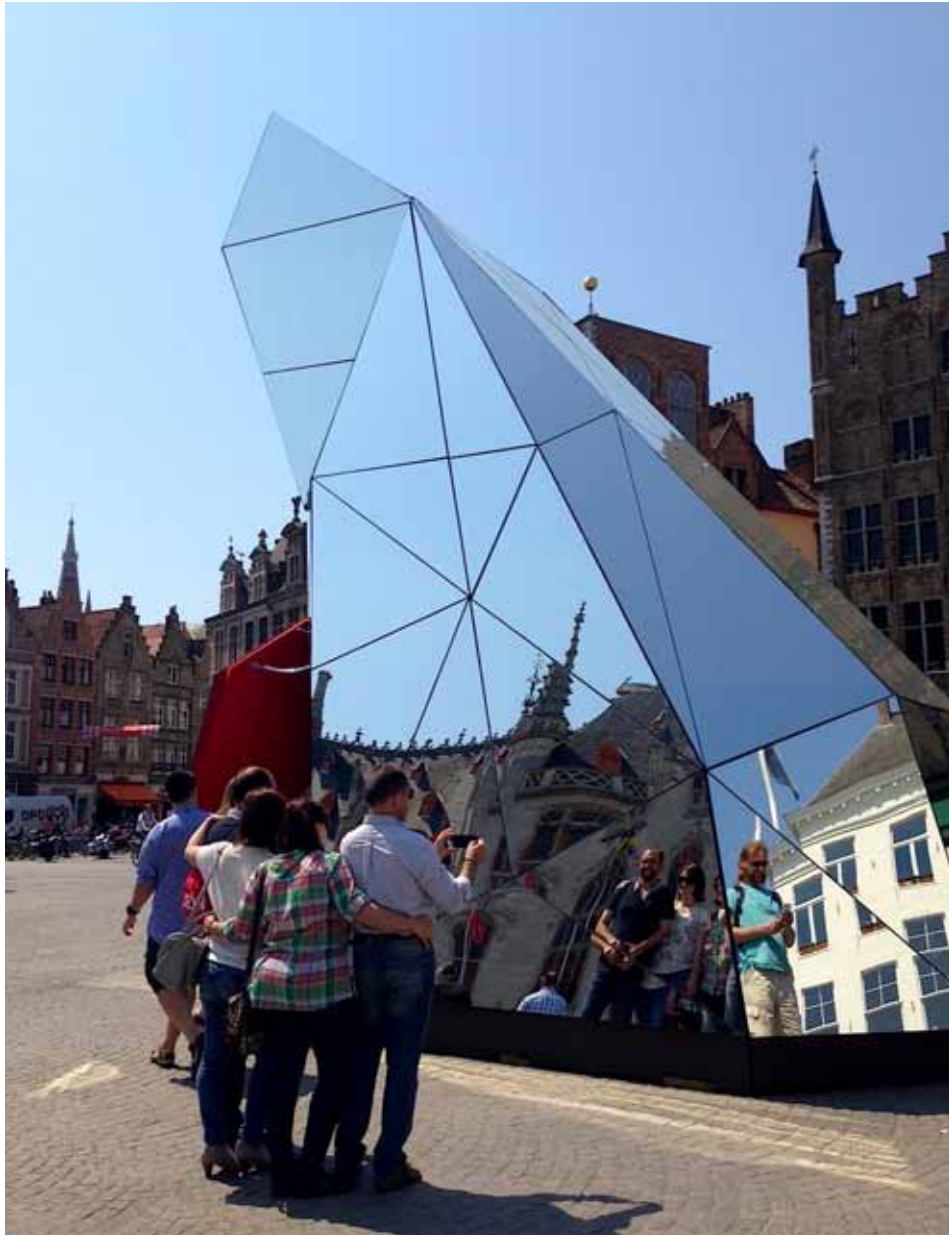
# WHO OWNS THE CITY?

## *Renegotiating the urban commons in Bruges*

Bruges is perhaps one of the most suitable places on the planet in which to hold a contemporary Art and Architecture Triennial, in that it comprises of an unusually well preserved centuries-old urban context, and thus provides physical contrast. Those that have contributed works, many of whom are from the world's fastest expanding metropolises, have imagined this small city should its millions of tourists become inhabitants. With projects that succinctly confront the issues of public and private space, the message resounds: through the increasing privatisation of common property, the public environment is being systematically torn away from the citizens it is meant to serve, here in this picturesque setting and in all the world's cities.

VEERLE DEVOS

Tree Huts in the courtyard of the Béguinage by Japanese artist Tadashi Kawamata, who has installed similar wooden structures in New York, Paris, and Berlin  
Photo: Tim Theo Deceuninck



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Those tourists, let's face it, visit for a legitimate reason, which is to enjoy the glorious city as it was during the 13th to 15th centuries: "Everything at that time happened either here or in Florence", says Till-Holger Borchert. Bruges was the most important trading centre in North-western Europe; the very first stock market was also created here. "Some scholars call it the cradle of capitalism." Entrepreneurial business people, innovative artists, scientists, and architects from all across Europe have settled in Bruges. "Painting as we know it was shaped here, when the revolutionary master, Jan Van Eyck, moved to the city and inspired others to follow." At the end of the 15th century, though, Bruges fell into disrepair. Then, in around 1870, a romantic interest for the mediaeval past arose, whence the city was promptly restored in the neo-Gothic style, albeit with a touch of artistic liberty (i.e. not necessarily based on historical research). All that did not fit the neo-Gothic image was demolished. The result was an imaginary mediaeval city that has withstood the test of time, partly because Bruges was spared during the World Wars. And in 2000, the entire city centre became a UNESCO World Heritage Site. An excellent place to experiment with contemporary urban ideas in art and architecture!

### REIMAGINING THE NOISE

That is, in theory. If one organises a Triennial in a UNESCO protected location, one is confronted with regulations, prohibitions, and bureaucratic



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procedures. Not allowing a light-projection on the Belfry because "it would disturb the Gothic character of the building" makes perfect sense in Bruges... Sadly, bureaucratic rules are not the only obstacles: there are also reluctant local politicians and certain inhabitants who for decades have rejected everything that smells of contemporaneity. Thus, even the totally innocuous aural landscapes by Bruce Odland and Sam Auinger were received with indignation. The artists had sampled the noise in Bruges for inclusion in an artwork called Quiet is the New Loud, and in an interview dared to comment on how "shockingly quiet" Bruges is. "You still hear birds chirping in the centre of town!" This, in sharp contrast with their home cities of New York and Berlin. They even called it "the capital of quietness". You might think this is great publicity for Bruges as a liveable city, but some of the residents where angry: for them, it is not yet quiet enough. Curiously, the 55,000 inhabitants of mediaeval Bruges would probably not recognise their own town in its time – it is likely to have been a lot noisier then, when Bruges was a cosmopolitan, bustling, innovative world city.

### ASSESSING THE FUTURE

But it's not just a significant per cent of those born and bred in Bruges who are snuffy towards the Triennial. "When you all of a sudden bring five million people into a city, you also have to ask the question: what is private and what is public", remarks Michel Dewilde. Japanese architect Yoshiharu Tsukamoto and his Atelier Bow-Wow do precisely that, by way of a wooden platform situated on one of the Reien canals, a sanctuary where the inhabitants can meet. It is in a part of the city that's rarely frequented by tourists (the tour boats make a U-turn here) and where UNESCO has no hold. Still, protests



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Where should citizens meet one another in Bruges? There are tourists everywhere... In the city's most public, touristic, commercial square, Norwegian artist Vibeke Jensen created a mirror sculpture where residents can rendezvous in private amid the bustle. (1)  
Photo: Veerle Devos

Co-curator Till-Holger Borchert, who is originally from Hamburg, Germany – a city that was heavily bombed during World War II: "Some perceive Bruges as an open-air-mediaeval-Disney-World-for-tourists; I enjoy the fact that this is a European city preserving its heritage very well." (2)  
Photo: Veerle Devos

Word sculpture A Place Beyond Belief by Nathan Coley, made in reference to 9/11 / The English artist likes to place this work in cities across the world in order to connect them. (3)  
Photo: Peter De Bruyne

Mass tourism. According the curators: "Every year, over five million tourists visit Bruges. What if they all decided to stay? What if a small, well preserved, historic city suddenly became a megalopolis?" This is the premise held by the artists and architects participating in the 2015 Art and Architecture Triennial, and a mental exercise for the 22,000 inhabitants of the old town centre as well as the millions of international visitors.



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Gold Guides Me by Norwegian artist Anne K. Senstad, at the Pakhuizen, a popular hangout among Triennial-goers (1)  
Photo: Veerle Devos

Vertically Integrated Socialism, an installation in a disused church by Canadian artist Nicolas Grenier / His idea is that the poor would live for free on the ground floor, with their rent covered by the middle class residents that live above them, who, in their turn, pay less than the millionaires in the penthouse. (2)  
Photo: Sarah Bauwens



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With his Passage Room, Belgian artist Daniel Dewaele tackles the Triennial's hypothetical question about what would happen if Bruges' five million visitors should suddenly decide to stay. (3)  
Photo: Sarah Bauwens

arose from neighbouring homeowners. "I bought this house along with the landscape", claimed one proud proprietor of a mediaeval building with view on the canal. Those wealthy (often foreign) residents seem to consider the public environment their own and are reluctant to share it. This would merely be a sad story were it not that what is happening in Bruges is exemplary of what is currently occurring in the rest of the world. Michel Dewilde: "Many cities today no longer belong to the average citizen, but rather to large institutions and to the affluent. Bruges is not unique in that respect – for example, in Shanghai you can legally buy parts of urban landscapes. Common property is becoming increasingly privatised." This all started ages ago with the enclosure of the commons. Thomas More wrote about it back in 1516 in his book Utopia: wealthy individuals who just put a fence around the public good, which is thus no longer accessible to everyone. Et voilà.

The Triennial challenges all of us to reconsider the identity of our cities. In Bruges, the 'cradle of capitalism' that since 1870 has been committed to the reconstruction of its mediaeval self, this mission is largely accomplished: everyone, from participating artists to the tourism board to local politicians and residents to supranational administrations, has been addressing the subject with much passion. This is greatly needed, as apart from the side effects of mass tourism and the privatisation of the public domain, there are extra challenges hidden behind those perfectly restored façades. For instance, Bruges tops the list of Belgium's shrinking and ageing cities, with less than half of the original population now living in the centre. Generations of young creatives have been relocating to more happening places, not least because of the high real estate prices – even though there's quite a lot of vacant property, including churches and monasteries. The questions raised by the Triennial are therefore pertinent. What kind of future does Bruges have in mind – to become a gated community for wealthy senior citizens? Or to open itself up and become a living city where people of various backgrounds and ages have the opportunity to practice their skills amidst an attitude of tolerance?



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Bridge by the Canal, by Indian architect Bijoy Jain of Studio Mumbai / Jain made an architectural trompe-l'oeil: an artisanal bridge with no function whatsoever, situated next to the canal, serving as a meeting point for those who wish to contemplate the city. (1)  
Photo: Piet Goethals

Israeli artist Romy Achituv installed his Cataract Gorge piece – a wooden reconstruction of a typical Bruges Gothic brick house – in the canal basin, where the city is linked to the sea. In the Middle Ages, goods and wealth flowed into the city along these canals. (2)  
Photo: Sarah Bauwens

2

Chinese artist Song Dong, whose work reflects upon the instability of existence and the transience of human contribution / His family history, the politico-cultural history of China, and the profound changes that urban Beijing is undergoing, are all recurring themes in his work. (1)  
Photo: Tim Theo Deceuninck



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Wu Wei Er Wei by Song Dong, made from the windows of demolished Chinese buildings, with Wu Wei, a concept of Taoism that means 'inaction' written above the sculpture in neon letters (2)  
Photo: Veerle Devos

## ADDRESSING THE VOID

On the other hand, if Bruges symbolises the museumification of cities throughout Europe, with tourism becoming the most important sector of the economy, this may well be the only opportunity for the old continent to survive the future. In this sense, the people who decided to restore Bruges back in 1870 might have had it right, providing the city with a unique selling proposition for its economic future. This is rather how Chinese artist Song Dong sees it. His installation of windows from demolished hutongs positioned at the feet of Sint-Salvator Cathedral confronts us with daily reality in his hometown of Beijing, where the patrimony is being destroyed at a furious pace to make way for new mega buildings. Then give us Bruges! We spotted a lot of work by Asian artists at the Triennial. Michel Dewilde: "We determinedly invited artists and architects from Mumbai, Beijing, Tokyo, and Seoul. People who know from experience what it feels like to live in a rapidly growing city, who have long since been rethinking their heritage and urban identity, who have to act to preserve their rights as residents and their quality of life."

This Triennial is proving to be a very interesting exercise, forcing Bruges to question its own myths and to reflect on its future and identity. A Triennial can reshape a city, even after 41 years of inactivity. But could this effect not simply disappear as soon as all the temporary works of art and architecture have been removed, with everything falling back into the old folds? "After the installations are gone, people will realise the void. That is where the magic starts", Till-Holger Borchert concludes, on a hopeful note. <

Triennial Bruges, a free art and architecture event in the historical city of Bruges, runs until 18 October 2015. [triennalebrugge.be](http://triennalebrugge.be)