

**Belgian Spaces of Obsolescence**  
**(Re)Materializing a History of Forgetting**

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*Lorsque l'homme entre dans un poème,  
l'immense poème de sa présence  
éteint tout autour de lui.*  
(Maurice Maeterlinck)

Once upon a time there was a city, and you may remark there was a city more than once, and all of it is true. This one city, though, was neither true to itself, nor became what it wanted to become, and so at great cost became a model for what other cities did not want to become at all costs. In trying to be something else, it turned into a verb, and the verb begat a noun: *bruxellisation*.

Long ago powerful men decided that ‘Manhattanisation’ was the wave of the future, that humble houses should make way for soaring skyscrapers, that rivers would henceforth be hidden, and that cobbled streets be replaced by multilane highways – taking modernity to the city’s very centre and bringing prosperity to all. But it was not meant to be. Riding on a wave of post-war optimism, the world fair of 1958 transformed the city on the surface yet the dirty stream now underground kept reminding the residents that in these regions water runs slowly and true change takes time. Still, two visionaries disagreed and vowed to warm the hearts of those cold to change. CDP and VDB, paladins of progress, boldly went where no Belgian had gone before: first into the future, second in a bottomless pit of cement, third to the top of

corporate real estate markets, before finally forfeiting their vision for lack of funds, support, or even interest.

Charly De Pauw (1920-1984), who in the fine city of Brussels went by the name of ‘King Parking,’ teamed up with his friend the politician ‘Polle Panch’ to raze the working-class neighborhood of ‘De Kassei’ and erect a 58-skyscraper district around an 8-tower World Trade Center, designed to outshine even its lustrous American example. And although the Manhattan-plan was officially accepted after valiant efforts of erstwhile-alderman-but-soon-to-be-prime-minister Paul Vanden Boeynants (1919-2001) in 1967, the economic miracle failed to materialize – even if its ramifications were all too concrete for the original inhabitants, but that is another story.

Brussels Manhattanized before finding tenants for its towers and so its futurist utopia soon enough turned what once was a bustling neighborhood into an urban wasteland, interspersed with big buildings that no one wanted and a now 3-tower World Trade Center that housed only public servants. Almost as if CDP and VDB believed it sufficed to sell a vision with gusto and bravado for it to blossom and bloom. *Quod non*, Manhattan stalled, Brussels ‘brusselized,’ and the area was renamed ‘North Space’ at the end of the 1990s – a metaphoric close, as it were, to a century of progress *à la belge*.

Still the spirit of ‘bruxellisation’ lives on, albeit chiefly in architectural circles where it denotes urban planning policy made to fit real estate developers without taking any existing spatial or social structures into account (Braeken et al. 40). But it also endures of course in the minds of the inhabitants of these and other Belgian spaces of obsolescence where the wave of the future made way for what American mass culture critic Norman Klein came to call a ‘history of forgetting’ (2008). Himself a regular guide of ‘anti-tours’ across a Los Angeles that once was – or should have been – this scholar focuses on the tension between what psychologists call an *imago*, “an idealized face left over from childhood” (3) or any other

moment of perceived coherence, and the similarly psychology-derived concept of ‘distraction’ through which “one false memory allows another memory to be removed in plain view” (2). Or, differently put, the relationship between on the one hand what we want something to be, and on the other the strategies behind this illusion. Cast, then, as an anti-history of a city or any other public space, Klein’s approach helps lift up the hood, as it were, on an almost magical meeting of past and present, materialism and idealism, space and myth. This story, in turn, will pick up Klein’s methodological lead to look at the storytelling strategies and contiguous mechanisms that facilitate a continual coping with the complexities of Belgian spaces of obsolescence.

Indeed, Belgian public space demands a great deal of cognitive flexibility to negotiate a history of often incomprehensible (im)mobility measures, questionable aesthetic choices, or even downright obsolete constructions – mixed, as these surrealist gems inevitably are, with aforementioned (pseudo-)visionary doublespeak and occasional political recuperation. And yet, as Belgians were all so gloriously reminded of during the longest formation crisis in the history of the world where their country survived with only a caretaker government for 541 days between 13 June 2010 and 6 December 2011, ostensibly insoluble problems are eventually resolved by applying quintessentially narrative techniques. Or what else to call, say, the unreliable narrator behind the CDP-VDB partnership<sup>1</sup>, the possible world of tomorrow they presented, or the narrativisation of ‘bruxellisation’? *Poser la question, c’est y répondre.*

To François Schuiten and Benoît Peeters, creators of the alter-history of *Brüsel* (1992), this is a city which has kept mourning its river ever since more than 150 years ago the ambitious young mayor Jules Victor Anspach decided to cover the humble and polluted Senne with Haussmann-esque boulevards, and so make a magnificent transition into modernity as was the case for his example *par excellence*, the Paris of Napoléon III (2008: n. pag.). Yet as the

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Debognie 1970 & 1974; Willems and Ilegems 1991; Timmermans 1991.

literature from *la ville de lumière* under the *Second Empire* attests, Brussels did not need its own Victor Hugo or Emile Zola to predict that the transition into modernity would not materialize without some serious misery. What one should however retain from these French literary examples is the multidimensional approach to their subject, which effectively situated said misery as an entangling of facts, forces, and spaces. The academic architects-duo Branko Kolarevic and Ali Malkawi for one described the impact of buildings on the individual psyche as affecting man in “indeterminate ways, in contrast to the fixity of predetermined, programmed actions, events, and effects” (205). The building as *facilitator* of sorts, then, and hence just another means of making sense of a complex context – but at the same time one that *affects* us directly.

Chris Salter’s 2010-book *Entangled*, a landmark study about the interplay of signifying systems, similarly starts from a premise rooted in anthropology by arguing that human beings, technical devices, and communicative processes are so intimately bound up in a conglomeration of relations that it becomes well-nigh impossible to tease out separate essences for each (xxxii). In his final book *Chaosmose* (1992) French psychotherapist and philosopher Félix Guattari likewise suggested “For each type of machine [...] to pose a question, not about its vital autonomy – it’s not an animal – but about its singular *power of enunciation*” (35). Taken together, these two views underscore the impossibility of absolute certainties while turning our attention to the material *mediation* involved in the creation of meaning. If one then adds a third view into the equation with Michel de Certeau’s observation that our notion of ‘space’ in effect is “produced by the practice of a particular *place*” (117 – emphasis added), it thereby transpires that not even material entities have a fixed meaning, but like all other constituents form part and parcel of a dynamic, because *reciprocal* process of signification.

Now, if we return to the Manhattanisation and subsequent Bruxellisation of the Belgian capital, the flimsy foundations on which it was built suddenly seem already less improbable after having determined that public spaces, too, are object and subject of narrative practices – with the noted distinction, though, that the narrative created by CDP and VDB to sell their WTC served not to make sense of a complex reality, but rather functioned as what Roland Barthes called a *second-order semiological system*; or more simply put: a *myth* (81). Along his logic, primary signification occurs through the Saussurean tension between signifier and signified, whereas myths shift this formal system sideways by undermining the referential basis of the signifier. It uses the same communicative medium, but empties its signifiers of a traceable reference to a concrete reality.

An evocative example of Barthes' argument was found in the unlikeliest of quarters when in 1989 Joseph Lisin, then retiring chief press officer for the Belgian federal ministry of public works, published a short booklet entitled *Un état communicatif* ['A Communicative State'] in which one could read the rather candid claim that at least 80% of the activities of this ministry's press corps was devoted, "d'une manière directe ou camouflée," to serve first and foremost personal agendas and ambitions (qtd. in Defossé 7). A state-sanctioned parallel reality, if you will, but one with very 'material' ramifications.

But why would the former federal ministry of public works want to cloak its activities with the veil of mythology? Perhaps because certain constructions over time have become sinkholes of public funds? Or because massive building sites were greenlighted without proper preparation? Or a mixture of both? Or a mixture of both sweetened with opportunism-presented-as-vision? Consider e.g. the example of the Rupel Tunnel, the only tunnel in Belgium to run under two waterways at once, but also infamous for being the most expensive one *in the world* at 11.000BEF (275EUR) per millimeter. Apparently, this was due to the 'unexpected' presence of big, hard rocks in the soil of this region reputed... for its brickyards. Or one could

discuss Charleroi's light rail transit system with 69 specific site stations foreseen for a population of a quarter million people. 57 years after the original plan was approved, two thirds of these are now operational while another six stations have been completed – some since 1987 – but have never been used. Or the order of 55 trains for this light metro with only 13 of these functioning ten years later while 17 others have been sold to the coastal line between Knokke and De Panne – an open line for which these powerful tramcars were not designed, with countless casualties as a result – and another 25 left to rust and rot unused on yard tracks. Alternatively, one could talk about the countless kilometers of unexploited metro-tunnels in Brussels, Antwerp, Charleroi again, or Liège which does not even have a metro. Then again, perhaps all these tunnels might soon sound too trite and should we direct our attention instead to some of the thousands of bridges built over our motorways and waterways, like the triumph of Belgian surrealism that is the viaduct of the E19 (formerly E10) in Sint-Job-in-'t-Goor over a lake, the so-called 'E10-pond' that arose due to the digging done to create the motorway, after which a long and expensive bridge had to be built to cross this self-generated lake. Or the viaduct a bit further afield in Oelegem over a canal that never was, yet which was duly equipped nonetheless with all the customary signposting. Or the cathedral of obsolescence that is the Varsenare viaduct over the railway line Brussels-Ostend in the middle of a vast field outside of Bruges. One could also talk about the equally infamous 'Smeerpijp,' a 107km pressurized pipeline between Genk and the Port of Antwerp serving to filter the chemical waste from factories located on the Albert Canal that, oh so surprisingly, was never used because the materials employed to assemble the tubes could not withstand, indeed, chemical waste (see Defossé and Hosni 2014).

At this point, it should be reasonably clear that there is little point in trying to enumerate all the excesses of Belgian civil engineering. Space, for one, does not permit it here, and the subject is arguably better suited for an architecture seminar. More pertinent, though, is the

resultant creation in 1986 of the cult-mockumentary-series by RTBF journalist Jean-Claude Defossé *Journal des Travaux Inutiles* (JTI) or ‘Bulletin of Obsolete Buildings.’ Originally designed to map the worst excesses in misguided or downright useless (public) construction projects, its humorous tone and lapidary logic quickly became more than the sum of its partly finished parts. Instead, it led to a double consciousness of indignation paired to a sense of heroic – because good-natured – survivalism in the face of Belgian absurdity. Revived on screen to great public acclaim in 1991 after the publication of the similarly successful book entitled *Le Petit Guide des Grands Travaux Inutiles* a year before, the term ‘Big Obsolete Buildings’ from then on nestled itself into the Belgian psyche to the point that 25 years later, at the official inauguration of – only! – the central circle line of the Charleroi metro, members of the public enthusiastically recognized Jean-Claude Defossé present in person, and promptly subverted the official discourse on the opening of the line live before the cameras of the associated press corps.

After all, the quasi-automatic re-routing of the official discourse situating the completion – or not! – of a public works project here is effectively in part attributable to Defossé’s subversive journalistic practice. But not exclusively so, as another contributing factor here concerns the human capacity – nay, innate reflex – of funneling contradictory bits of information into a seemingly coherent *narrative*. American narratologist David Herman succinctly summarized the process as follows: narrative “triggers a recipient to activate knowledge about the world [while] reconciling emergent with prior knowledge” (1048). As demonstrated by the case example of the JTI, the medium here was more than ever the message in the sense that it referred to ‘concrete’ constructions in the public space whose meaning was mediated by a motley gamut of discourses, (mis)uses, and personal projections. Conversely, the leading historiographer Hayden White once posited that “The reality [which] lends itself to narrative representation is the conflict between desire and the law” (12). Hence, the narrative

produced by engaging with Belgian spaces of obsolescence comes to function as a *vehicle* for idiosyncratic, yet no less ideological constructions on behalf of the reactions it stimulates. And so we are back where we started, at the nexus of word and image, place and space, materiality and mythology. Or as Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has it, the realm of the *dispositif* where logic and technology meet *poetry* (7).

Once more returning to the Manhattanisation-scandal, this historical anecdote effectively holds the power to recalibrate our thinking precisely as it is partly mythical, partly virtual because unrealized, partly violating our sense of justice, yet at the same time also rooted in a material reality. To French philosopher Alain Badiou, this power is then unleashed when said ‘fragment of reality’ is *theatricalized* (17) – i.e. presented as precisely that: a partial reality, something that is not entirely what it seems, both real and artificial at once. Of course, said reasoning lies at the heart of any historiographical study, but becomes an emancipatory force when the narrativisation-impulse inherent to history writing is exposed as a meta-code, an actual survival strategy through which we order a chaotic reality into an orderly narrative (see also White 1). After all, as Hayden White reminds us, “it is often overlooked that the conviction that one can make sense of history stands on the same level of epistemic plausibility as the conviction that it makes no sense whatsoever” (73). What tips the balance one way or the other is then but a mere matter of persuasion, an art which CDP and VDB mastered like no other and which relies quintessentially on techniques borrowed from literature.

With “performance, rather than fidelity, [as] their goal” (41) – to borrow this time a formula from qualitative reasoning expert Kenneth Forbus, the promoters of ‘Big Obsolete Buildings’ in fact betrayed their agenda not by their words but by the materialization of the mythical narrative they constructed. While taking a realist setting, mixing it with vision, selling it with rhetorical charisma, and leaving the difficult questions to be answered by the public as concrete was already being poured, they overlooked the principle that *spaces* are constituted

through the entanglement of various concepts, objects, materials and users (see also Wiens 96), and hence that poor planning could potentially come to haunt them in the shape of monumental shrines testifying to their incompetence and/or corruption.

As early as 1896 philosopher Henri Bergson in his book on *Matter and Memory* developed the idea that our notion of time, whilst measurable, likewise is experienced through an entanglement of past, present, and future, as well as mind and body (Bergson 1965 [*Matière et Mémoire*, 1896]). Now if one links the entanglements of time and space with the narrativization of ‘concrete’ historical elements – like buildings – and a false history partly founded on myth-making and partly on erasing an embarrassing past, Norman Klein’s ‘history of forgetting’ resurfaces as fertile platform generating a re-emphasized form of history writing: less focused on facts, yet all the more on the materialization of its narrative nature. Not ‘History’ as we knew it, but ‘*history*.’ This new perspective, Klein claims, in turn has spawned a whole new panoply of historiographical hybrids like docu-novels, false autobiographies, public autobiography, faction, or, indeed, the ‘mockumentary’ *à la* Jean Claude Defossé (Klein 7).

While primarily a cognitive phenomenon, forgetting like ‘time’ itself is both objectively measurable yet essentially uncontrollable. In the case of our ‘Bulletin of Obsolete Buildings’ there arguably also was a moral imperative to counter the slide into historical oblivion of Belgium’s most surreal excesses of civil engineering. A moral imperative which, by its own narrative *format*, effectively became a vehicle for intellectual emancipation: not by lecturing its audience, but by acquainting them with the *literary* – because narrative driven yet referentially resistant – malleability of a material reality. To historiographers this is understood as a matter of course – says Alun Munslow, editor of the Routledge journal *Rethinking History*:

The crude empiricist or reconstructionist emphasis on the historian as the impartial observer who conveys ‘the facts’ is a paradigm (defined as a set of beliefs about how to gain knowledge) that obscures history’s real character as a *literary* undertaking. (1-2, emphasis added)

Defossé in his 3-4 minute mini-mockumentaries told a verifiable story by staging himself as a baffled *schlemiel* everyman *enacting* the absurdity implied by the spaces of obsolescence he described – most notoriously while paddling in the dry Oelegem-Zandvliet canal, bearing a cross in the abandoned tunnels of the Charleroi metro, wearing a grotesque radiation suit at the completed but never activated nuclear power plant of Kalkar (DE), or dressed as J.R. Ewing driving a seventies American convertible through the streets of the Manhattan-district in Brussels while scored with the series’ trademark theme song. Topped with humorous comments that were biting without being bitter, he adopted the narrative structure of myth yet furnished it with facts, and so presented an approach that refused to preach but still stirred indignation via the aegis of intellectual *engagement*. For, not only did his audience have to juggle facts, fiction, and format, it also had to confront the essentially entangled but traditionally disparate conceptions of space, myth, and writing as *complementary* constituents of our interpretation. In doing so, spectators effectively re-materialized a history of forgetting while re-routing traditional conceptions of writing into a multidimensional, multimedial, and fundamentally *integrative* practice – just like CDP and VDB had done in their day (see esp. Bolter 1996).

RTBF, the broadcasting station which originally aired our ‘Bulletin of Obsolete Buildings’, rematerialized its own history when junior presenter Samy Hosni a quarter of a century later revisited the spaces of obsolescence that Defossé had lifted into the collective consciousness. At the same time, Hosni also introduced a fresh batch of more recent architectural absurdities as a recurring sequence of the consumer awareness television show *On n’est pas des pigeons* – thereby echoing tone and narrative format of its historical

predecessor. The broadcaster subsequently released a DVD which bundled all JTI-sequences ever aired, and systematically paired old and new in those cases when Hosni revisited those spaces once ‘inhabited’ by Defossé’s narrativisations. Creating an extra layer of signification to an already entangled writing practice, these new developments in our obsolescence-saga were, if anything, another incentive towards individual intellectual *agency*. At the same time, though, it confirmed Norman Klein’s claim that “popular memory [is] an alternative form of literature” (7), a sort of “synthetic cubism” (9) that is at once limited and multidimensional, and thus if re-routed as a writing strategy far more representative of human cognition while significantly less deceptive than one-dimensional, single-track narratives – be they founded on facts, myth, or both.

The material dimension of writing in or with public spaces offers the additional advantage that sweeping statements and gross generalizations become problematic. Think back of ‘King Parking’ Charly De Pauw, real estate developer *extraordinaire* who became fabulously wealthy but lost all his social capital due to an enduring, cemented memento of his megalomania in the shape of three towers sitting empty in an urban wasteland. Then again, this story, too, though here revived and rephrased will gradually fall prey to a history of forgetting, as is inevitable and also necessary. After all, as this essay hopefully has shown, our conception of reality in fact amounts to an uncontrollable amalgam of impulses and matrices organized along relatively flexible referential frameworks by means of narrative strategies. This means they can be revived and adapted at any time, yet also run the risk of being forgotten altogether – even if said risk is slighter, of course, when the memory is cast in concrete.

The argument to include spaces and buildings into narrative analysis is by no means new. Indeed, ever since the 1960s onward the concept of ‘text’ has been continually reconceptualized to include meaning structures comprised of various semiotic codes (see Desjardins 48). Therefore the story told by the ‘Bulletin of Obsolete Buildings’ is also by no

means a singular one with a simple, critical argument, but instead constitutes an attempt at revealing what Michel Delville has called a “poetic defamiliarization of the real” (231), a kind of meta-awareness that reality is complexly entangled, absolutely inaccessible, yet materialized at the same time, and hence can only be accessed via a poetic collage of myriad constituents. Such ‘subjectivity of renouncement’ (Badiou 50) is a humbling conclusion and an empowering one all the same, as it implies we have to give up control but are rewarded with more freedom.

Writing a history of forgetting finally means by no means that the past is always past and the present unrepresentable. It only teaches us to read with new eyes that recognize meaning is dependent on the objects it describes and the person describing them. So, too, did Kwinten Gernay’s 2016-film *Manhattan, Brussels* narrate the story of CDP, VDB, and the WTC with the voice of a local folk hero the one-time European boxing champion Joseph ‘Kid’ Davidt (1913-1998) – a voice disembodied, one must add, for coming from beyond the grave. Another narrative appropriation, then, for greater persuasive effect. But there is nothing wrong with some poetic license from time to time, as all our Belgian spaces of obsolescence would tell you if only they could speak. So do believe in them, I urge you, look at them, interpret their story. Or else they were truly built for nothing.

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