the Bulletin

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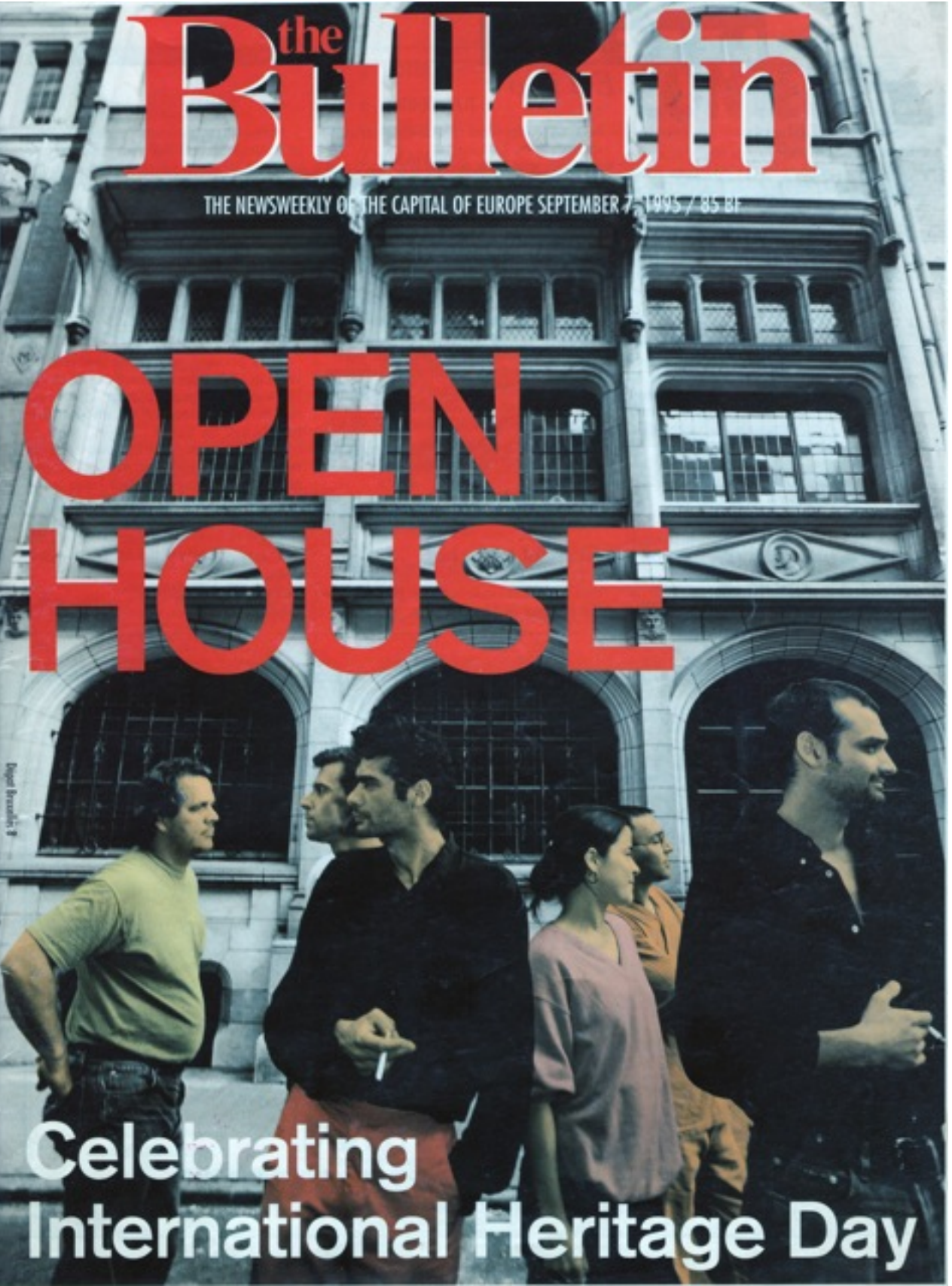
OPEN HOUSE



Celebrating International Heritage Day

THIERRY VANBRESSEM

Not just monasteries and museums, but a blacksmith's forge, a kiosk in the town square, a mosaic swimming pool, a battlefield – the nation's heritage is made up of many things. **Cleveland Moffett** previews the Europe-wide celebration of International Heritage Day

The word heritage has such a prim and solemn air about it. We think of stately homes, of monuments to the glorious dead, of institutions immured in granite. It suggests ancient respectability, fine porcelain, tapestries and ancestors.

It's not necessarily true, of course, because everything from breweries and windmills to narrow-gauge railways can be part of a nation's heritage. And thanks to the annual celebration of international Heritage Day in Europe, people everywhere are discovering that they have more to be proud of than they thought.

The sheer quantity of things and places – palaces and factories, gardens and canals, farms and wildlife sanctuaries – makes even the most perfunctory overview of what's on offer quite impossible. In Belgium, the nation's heritage is divided into three parts. For once, regionalism has its advantages: since each region has its own dates, visitors can squeeze in that many more monuments and sites. (Heritage Day in fact comprises four days; see panel.)

Wallonia has set aside exactly 561 places to visit, things to look at, events to take in (plus 250 *animations*). Not to be

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outdone, Flanders is weighing in with 750 *monumenten en landschappen*, while Brussels is doing its bit with 120 "parks, gardens and buildings in or near a natural environment." While this superabundant display of architectural, cultural and natural wealth betrays the country's underlying regional rivalries, it is an understandable, albeit expensive, spirit of competition.

Each region chooses its own theme for the Day. This year, Brussels has taken architecture and nature and Wallonia and Flanders are both featuring their public or civil patrimony – by which they mean everything that belongs to the community, such as schools, hospitals, libraries, townhalls or cemeteries. Each region has produced its own illustrated catalogue to list and describe its attractions, tell us where they are and how to track them down in the wilds of the Ardennes and the farther reaches of West Flanders or Wezembeek-Oppem.

Unfortunately, only the remoter locations are likely to be visitor-friendly, meaning uncrowded. If you pick one of the more obviously desirable spots – any of the Art Nouveau houses not usually open to the public, or some of the private châteaux – be prepared to suffer the long queues outside and the shoulder-to-shoulder crush inside.

In a move that indicates a new willingness to broaden the definition of heritage to include the near past and the unconventional, Brussels' Service des Monuments et Sites (francophone branch) has this year included the Moving Art Studio (Mas) at 48 Rue Saint-Bernard in Saint-Gilles. The studio was started as an ingenious solution to the perennial problem of finding suitable working space for painters and sculptors: the owner doesn't have to pay taxes on an empty building and the rent-free occupants attend to the upkeep until the owner decides to sell it.

Twenty artists share the premises, which includes a workshop for cartoonists and a film studio. Built in 1912 by architect Adrien Blomme for the engineer and diplomat Lucien Graux (it's still called the Maison Graux), it is a return to the neo-Gothic style of an earlier generation, the elaborate façade with its covered stone balconies, stained-glass latticework windows, arched casements and carved medallions, all concealing a humbler interior.

Once inside, visitors may wonder why the place was ever selected for inclusion on this day of days. Even spruced up for the occasion, it exudes the artists' purposeful activity and little of the luxury of yesteryear. The explanation is the garden, a *jardin sauvage* that extends steeply uphill by a winding path of rough steps through a tangled underbrush and trees. It's not just *anglais* in its informality, it is badly in need of a machete.

OTMAR BOLLAERT & KAREL MOORTGAT

Reach for the sky: The Moving Art Studio and some of its residents, left; and Aalst's council chambers

The man turning the terrain into a site for his stone sculptures is the California-born Larry Passey. "My materials are cobbles of the kind you see everywhere in the streets of Brussels, although I had to go to Aalst to find any I could buy. What I'm doing is arranging them in a series of separate arches, starting with the simplest form, then changing them into less obvious patterns. This jungle of a garden is perfect."

Gardens loom large on the Heritage inventory: across town in Anderlecht, the Erasmus House has finally produced the garden it has long sorely lacked, a space that now evokes the days when the Dutch humanist lived and wrote here. The tamed and topiaried geometrical flower-beds in the French manner have been restored to something of their former splendour.

Not far away is the extraordinary, now abandoned, Veterinary School of Cureghem, saved from demolition or radical renovation thanks to a small band of urban conservationists. A complex of 19 buildings, the huge clinic was necessary at a time when nearly everyone owned a horse or horses, whose ills and injuries were expertly attended to in these spacious laboratories, and generations of vets were taught in these high-ceilinged classrooms. Today, it provides a glimpse into a not-so-distant past far different from our own.

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